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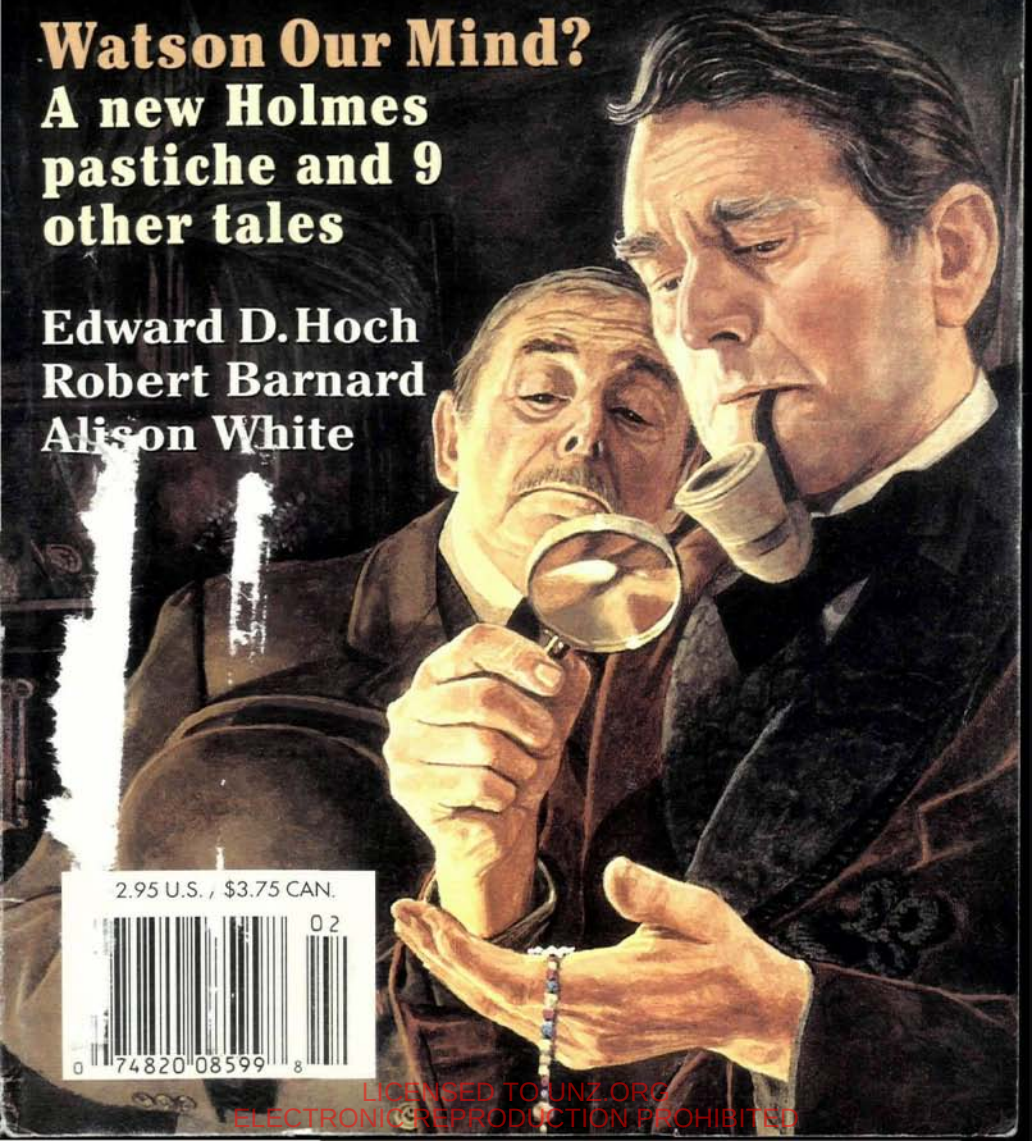

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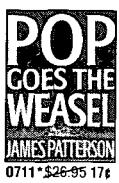

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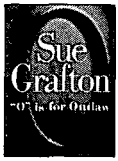

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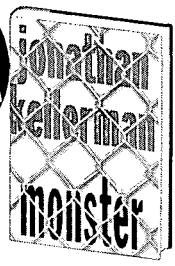

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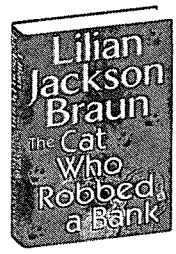

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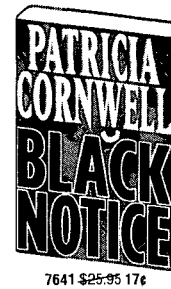

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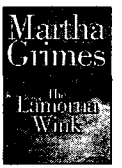

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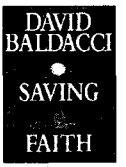

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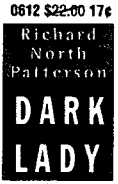

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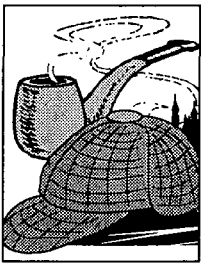

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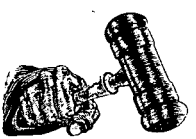

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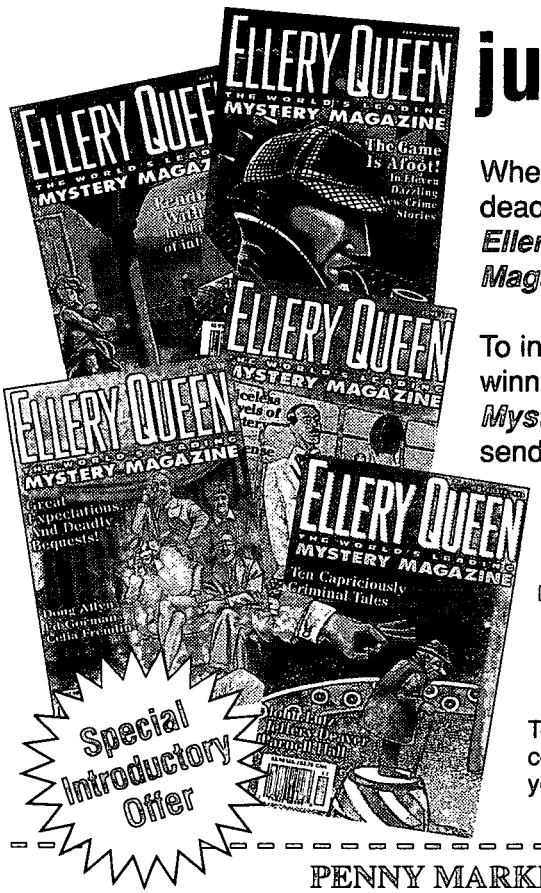

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THE THIRD MANNY

by Terence Faherty

1.

Manny is an unusual name, but I've known three bearers of it. The first was a Brooklyn garage owner who once stored a car for me. The second was the supervisor of a sweatshop bar I'd briefly tended in Atlantic City. The third Manny, Manny Vu, very nearly killed me.

My name, incidentally, is Owen Keane. Manny Vu and I came together on Highway Nine in the southernmost tip of New Jersey one rainy afternoon. The rain was light but steady, just enough to disappoint the summer renters on the barrier islands to the east, the "shoobies," as the year-round residents derisively dubbed the tourists. I was no shoobie, having lived for years on the northern edge of Great Egg Bay. But as I headed south to visit an old friend who was renting a house in West Cape May, I was entering unfamiliar territory. Even so, I felt safe enough leaving the Garden State Parkway when I encountered a traffic backup near the Burleigh exit. I knew that wherever the parkway went, the older

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Route Nine eventually followed.

I was no sooner settled onto the two-lane than I came to a long break in the oncoming traffic. The gap let me see the car from some distance, a little blue Japanese coupe that passed three slower cars in a single bound. The coupe never recovered from that pass; it was already skidding when it reentered the northbound lane. I thought for a heartbeat that the car would hit a pole on its side of the road. But the driver corrected, then overcorrected, then came at me across the center line.

There was a picket fence to my right. I would have taken it in preference to the oncoming car if I'd had time to think. But I didn't have time. I hit the brakes hard, not remembering to pump them until I began to hydroplane. By then the oncoming car was pirouetting, its front end turning away from me and toward the fence. I saw the coupe's left rear fender perpendicular to my Chevy's snub nose and a foot away. Then I closed my eyes.

When I opened them again, I was sitting at an angle in my seat. That is, the seat was at an angle, the Chevy having come to rest in a shallow ditch. Smoke was pouring from its sprung hood. Even after my brain had correctly reclassified it as steam coming from the smashed radiator, I stayed panicked. I fumbled with my seat belt, forced open my door against the resistance of the ditch bank, and tumbled out.

The blue coupe had gone through the fence and into the yard beyond. It was still upright, but it had skidded around to face the street. I could see the crumpled passenger side and the front end, which was wearing broken pickets like an obscene garland.

I stumbled to the wreck. The little car's windshield was starred. I couldn't see the driver until I reached his open window. Then I didn't see him clearly for the warm rain in my eyes. I could just make out a slight dark-haired figure slumped over a bloody steering wheel. Before I could reach out to touch it, someone touched me. She moved me aside without really looking at me, a young woman with clipped hair and sunglasses as narrow as swimmer's goggles.

Terence Faherty is one of the most original writers working in the crime genre. His popular detective Owen Keane has changed occupations several times in the course of the series Mr. Faherty began in 1991. In a starred *Publishers Weekly* review of one entry in the series, Keane was described as "an odd bird in an equally odd series, one that is consistently low key, gently thoughtful and enlightening."

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"Let me," she said. "I'm a nurse."

I tried to watch through the ruined windshield, but I was distracted by a slip of paper tucked behind the visor. It was a computer-printed receipt for the Cape May-Lewes ferry with a banner headline: "THIS IS NOT A BOARDING PASS."

There was more to read—something about the number of axles and a time and a date—but the rain was in my eyes again. I brushed at them with my hand. It came away bright red.

I tapped the nurse on the shoulder and showed her my hand. She looked past it to my face and then addressed someone behind me.

"Sit him down before he falls down."

2.

Two ambulances responded to calls placed on cell phones by rubberneckers on Nine. Before the driver of the coupe had been removed from his car, I was in the first ambulance, on my way to Cape May Memorial, strapped to a board as a precaution against neck injuries. I'd already decided that I'd live, having eavesdropped on an exchange between the rescue technician and the nurse with the narrow sunglasses. I'd heard: "Superficial scalp wound, the kind that bleeds like a son of a bitch." The second opinion had been a reassuring "Yep."

At the hospital, they took a more circumspect approach. It was one of the rare times when I had health insurance, and the emergency-room doctors made the most of it. After my wound had been sewn up and covered with a nearly invisible dressing, I was X-rayed from a number of angles, with and without my board. Then I was placed in a room whose only reading material was a chart of the human endocrine system. That was just as well, as my head was aching seriously by then. Also my chest, where the shoulder harness had caught me, and my left knee. I slumped in my chair, held a cold pack to my head, and thought of the motionless driver of the coupe.

Other than the receipt from the ferry, I'd noted only the car's New Jersey plates and its make and model: Nissan Sentra. I ran over this scant information again and again in between replays of the crash itself. Whenever a nurse came by to promise me the prompt attention of a radiologist, I asked about the Sentra's driver. Each time I was told he hadn't been admitted.

That mystery was finally explained to me by a Cape May County sheriff's deputy who arrived to take my statement. She was a blonde of no great height named Nelson whose belt—as crowded with equipment as Batman's—made her hips look incredibly wide.

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I regretted that unkind observation when I got to know Deputy Nelson, a process that happened almost as fast as the accident had. Before she'd gotten my brief statement down, I'd seen pictures of her kids and heard her opinion of Route Nine—dangerous—and the hospital—first rate.

"Don't worry about your partner not showing up, Mr. Keane," she said, referring to the driver of the coupe. "He might have been taken to County General. That's the older hospital down south. They get the county business, by which I mean the people without health insurance. Could be the other driver—" She consulted her clipboard. "Could be Mr. Vu didn't have health insurance. A lot of people don't these days. I can call down there for you if you want. But it wasn't your fault, the accident. You did everything you could do."

She'd already assured me of that several times. I wondered if she considered all accident survivors to be sensitive on the point or if I was projecting a particularly guilty aura. "I could have turned into the fence," I said.

"Then he would have hit the car behind you. That was the nurse who stopped to help you. She had two kids in her car. If you'd crossed the center line, you would have hit the car behind Mr. Vu, a subcompact with two retired teachers in the front seat. So you see, it worked out about as well as it could have. God was directing things out there today."

Including the initial skid, I thought. It was a theological perspective that led a person to dwell on minor details, something I was inclined to by nature. At the moment, I was interested in the information the deputy had on her clipboard. I was straining my sore neck for a better view when Nelson surprised me by handing the board over.

"I wasn't able to interview him," she said. "He was still unconscious when they took him away. But I got some basic information from his driver's license."

I was reading it. Name: Manny Vu. Address: 52 McClelland Street, Jersey City. Age: eighteen.

"Feel free to make a note of that for your insurance company," Nelson said. "Or you can wait for your copy of my report. I'm not sure about Mr. Vu's auto insurance," she added, preparing me for the blow. "I called the number Information had for that Jersey City address, but the girl I spoke to was too upset to tell me much."

A doctor arrived then with a packet of X-rays. The deputy greeted him like a candidate for office and then took back her clipboard.

"I'll call County General," she told me. "I'll know something before you're through here."

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She was back before the radiologist had even unpacked. "Something's wrong down there, Mr. Keane. I'm going to drive down and check it out. I'll call you at home."

"Did he die?" I asked.

"No," she said. "He walked away."

3.

My old friend, the temporary resident of West Cape May, came by the hospital to pick me up about four-thirty. Her name was Marilyn Tucci. She was a New York City office worker two weeks into a three-week vacation. A shoobie, therefore, although I'd never have actually called her that. She'd been my girlfriend, once upon a time, but I'd never dared to call her that, either.

When she arrived at the hospital, Marilyn hid her concern for me under a mask of irritation. She hid it so well that only someone as familiar with her as I was could even glimpse it.

"It took you a week to talk me into an afternoon visit," Marilyn said as she walked me to her car, a tiny station wagon. "Now I suppose you're expecting to stay over tonight."

"The doctors did suggest that I be kept under observation," I said.

"I've been suggesting that for years," Marilyn replied.

As she drove us south on Nine, I did a little discreet observing of my own, noting Marilyn's biohazard tan and her hair, a symphony of sun-lightened kinks and curls barely held in place by a deceptively girlish headband. And I wondered whether, sore bones and all, there might be a possibility of progressing beyond observation to an actual physical exam.

Marilyn settled the matter a mile or so later. "You can stay. I've a second bedroom I'm not using."

I returned to a consideration of the outside world just in time to see the site of the accident coming up. I pointed it out to my driver. She slowed, but didn't stop.

"You're lucky to still be walking around, Keane. Come to think of it, I've been saying that for years, too."

I was thinking of using the crack as a segue to the subject of Manny Vu, the man who had walked away from County General. Before I could, I spotted a sign for Rio Grande. I asked Marilyn to take the next right.

"Why exactly?"

"My car was towed to a lot in Rio Grande. I want to check it out."

"Okay, but if there's an overnight bag in the trunk, you're walking home."

Rio Grande wasn't a big place, and I had the lot's address, given

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me by Deputy Nelson. But it still took us awhile to home in. J&S Towing was well outside of town, on a road that had almost petered out by the time it reached the salvage yard's sandy drive. The whole establishment consisted of a tin-roofed building and a quarter acre of rusting cars surrounded by a chain-link fence.

The entrance to the little building was guarded only by a screen door, unlatched. I could hear a phone ringing just inside. I'd been hearing it ever since Marilyn parked her car. I went in, calling "Hello" but not expecting an answer.

The customer area was a room with discount-store paneling and shag carpet that had enough sand in it to grow tomatoes. I tracked in a little more on my walk to a chest-high counter. It held the ringing phone and two business-card stands. Both displays contained J&S Towing cards. Those on the left belonged to someone named John Pardee, those on the right to a Stu Hunter.

Beyond the counter was a desk that supported a citizens-band radio and an obsolete computer. Behind the desk was the obligatory calendar featuring the more than obligatory woman. She was wearing only her underwear and carrying an assault rifle. The combination seemed incongruous to me, but she looked comfortable with it. While I was meditating on that, the radio came to life.

"Crabber to Clammer, come back. John, you there? Come back. Where the hell are you? Come back."

"Please do," I said.

I found Marilyn waiting next to her car. "Nobody home?"

"Looks that way. I'm going to find the Chevy."

"Be careful, Keane. Meaner than a junkyard dog is more than just a snappy lyric."

Despite that reservation, Marilyn walked with me around the shack to the fenced lot. The fence had a gate and the gate had a chain and a padlock. But the lock was open and the chain was hanging loose.

"They're a little slack on security," Marilyn observed. "Then again, who'd want to steal these beauties?"

The inventory consisted of a dozen wrecks in various stages of decay. The one I'd come to see was front and center, a red Chevrolet Cavalier, a foot or so shorter than it had been when it left the factory in 1986.

"Totaled," Marilyn said, peeking under the tented hood.

The Chevy was only the second car I'd ever owned. I'd never felt any real love for it, but we'd been through a lot together. I hated to see it squatting in the weeds.

Marilyn had circled around behind the car. "Someone's been in your trunk," she said.

"It must have popped open during the wreck."

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"Your spare tire's been thrown out. And your jack."

It was true. Even the old blanket I kept on hand for emergency picnics was on the ground.

"You don't have a flat. Somebody's been searching for goodies. I don't suppose you had a CD changer in there."

"Never heard of such a thing," I said. I opened the passenger door and then the glove compartment. Its contents were untouched, as near as I could tell. I took the registration and the insurance papers and left the rest of the clutter.

Marilyn was calling to me. "This one's been rifled, too."

She was standing next to Manny Vu's Nissan Sentra. Its hatchback had been popped open, and its spare tire and jack removed.

I looked inside the Sentra, avoiding the bloody steering wheel. The backseat had been pulled apart. The bottom section now rested against the backs of the front buckets. The coupe's glove box had been opened and emptied. Forgetting my fear of dried blood, I checked the visor for the receipt from the ferry. It was gone.

"Think we scared away one of Rio Grande's notorious spare-tire thieves?" Marilyn asked.

"I hope so," I said.

4.

Marilyn's house was a toy Cape Cod a long way from any beach. "You can save a lot of money if you're willing to drive a little," she said as we parked.

She needn't have troubled to explain. I knew Marilyn. She wanted the ocean and the beach and even the restaurants and shops in moderation. But what she really prized after forty-nine weeks in New York City was privacy. She'd found it in West Cape May. Her little house had a deck that looked out on a flat yard bordered by crab trees. Neither the yard nor the trees seemed even to have noticed the afternoon's rain. Beyond the tree border was an even browner field.

We sat considering the view, Marilyn drinking Chablis and me iced tea. Instant iced tea, which my hostess had whipped up herself. She talked about her vacation to date and her job. I thought about Manny Vu.

After a time, Marilyn said, "What about dinner? I can make something or we can order a pizza."

I stole a glance at my glass. The ice cubes were brown with the residue of undissolved iced-tea mix. "Hold the anchovies," I said.

Before Marilyn could stir from her seat, her phone rang. She went to answer it and came back quickly and displeased.

"It's for you. A Deputy Nelson. You told her you'd be here?"

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"I called it a remote possibility," I said and moved inside as fast as my sore knee would let me.

The deputy's friendly voice was comforting, but the feeling didn't last. "We've got a real mystery here, Mr. Keane. I don't know much more than I did the last time I saw you. They're telling me that Mr. Vu just got up and walked out of here."

"He was okay?"

"No, he was badly hurt. His condition was described to me as serious but not life-threatening. They had him stabilized, and they were going to do more tests. When they went to check on him, he was gone."

"When was this?"

"Around three-thirty is when they think he left. He was last checked about twenty after three."

"He wasn't hooked up to any medical monitors?"

"One. It was switched off. The nurse's station was busy and nobody noticed. He removed his own IV, too. And get this. He made his bed."

That interesting detail didn't jibe with the vision I'd been having of a bandaged Manny Vu trashing his wrecked car and mine.

"We're searching the area," Nelson was saying. "No one saw him walking around. None of the local cab companies called for him. We haven't gotten any reports of stolen cars. Like I said, I can't tell you much."

I wasn't sure why she was telling me anything. I decided that she needed to tell somebody and I was handy. I felt a similar temptation regarding what we'd found in Rio Grande, but I overcame it.

When the deputy finished with me, I dug out the two towing-company business cards. I noted that the office number was the same on both but the emergency number was different. I decided that each was the home number of the partner whose name appeared on the card.

I dialed the office number. It was picked up on the first ring by a man who said, "John?"

"Mr. Hunter?" I asked back, shuffling my two cards. "My name is Keane. My car was towed to your lot this afternoon. A red Cavalier."

"Right. Sorry. Things are a little messed up here. I don't have your paperwork in front of me. Let us know if you want the car moved someplace else. If your claims adjuster wants to inspect the car here, he should call first so someone can be here to unlock the gate."

"I was there an hour ago," I said. "The gate was wide open."

"Shit. Sorry. Didn't know you'd been here. My partner was supposed to be watching the store. He went off somewhere and left

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everything open. He's the one who towed your car, so he'll have to get your ticket ready. Your bill, I mean. You're probably not in a hurry for that."

"Somebody broke into my car after it got to your lot."

"Shit. I didn't go in there to look. I locked things up again, though."

"I'd like to talk to your partner about it."

"So would I," Hunter said with some feeling. "But I don't know where he's gotten off to."

"Is there any chance he'd be at his home number?"

"Not unless he just got there. I drove past his place on my way here and there was no sign of John or his truck. He does this every once in a while when the weather's nice. Take off, I mean. One of us will call you tomorrow and straighten all this out."

He asked me for a phone number. I looked up at the number on Marilyn's rented wall phone but decided not to risk it. I gave him my number in Mystic Island and hung up.

5.

Before rejoining Marilyn on the porch, I checked the cabinet nearest the phone. The phone book was tucked inside it, a combination white and yellow pages rolled up like a sleeping bag. In it, I found a John Pardee with a Rio Grande address. The phone number was the same one given as the emergency number on his business card. The clincher, if I needed one, was that the address was on the same road as J&S Towing. Stu Hunter had just told me he'd passed by his partner's place on his way to the lot. I tried Pardee's number and got no answer.

Outside, Marilyn was mellower than I had any right to expect. I discreetly checked the level of the wine in her bottle and decided it was safe to proceed with the plan I'd hatched in her kitchen.

"I'd like to borrow your car for an hour or so," I said. "I can stop while I'm out and pick up dinner."

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Back to Rio Grande. I want to talk to the man who towed my car."

"About what? The trunk being opened?"

"That and other things."

"Let's have it, Keane. Don't stop until you're sure I won't say, 'Go on.'"

I told her the little I knew about Manny Vu's disappearance.

"What makes you think this Pardee knows anything about that?"

I shrugged.

"Call him."

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"I tried. He's not at home, or he's not answering. He might be in for visitors."

"And if he's not, you can nose around," Marilyn said, reading me like the top line of an eye chart. She knew me that well. Well enough to know that I'd never been able to resist a mystery, despite having decades of good reasons for resisting them.

I could no longer surprise Marilyn, but she could still surprise me. "I'll go with you," she said.

It was still light and would be for a while. The drive back to Rio Grande felt shorter, as return trips always do. It helped that we stopped short of a full round trip to J&S Towing. About a mile short. I was driving, due to Marilyn's high Chablis content. Driving and navigating both, since I was the one who spotted the mailbox marked "Pardee" in faded script.

The box belonged to an old farmhouse, not recently painted, and a barn, never painted. I parked next to the open barn door, which made it a logical first stop on the walking tour. There were no vehicles inside, no tow trucks, no cars, no motorcycles. Just a pile of old junk ready for a trip to a garbage dump or a flea market. The walls were hung with hoses and ladders and a pair of rakes that were unlike any I'd ever seen, long-handled with light tines that curled up from a basketlike base.

I found Marilyn outside next to a tomato patch that lay between the barn and the house. A former patch, I should say, as it had been harvested in a very complete but unorthodox way. The dozen or so plants, heavy with green and red tomatoes, had been pulled out of the ground, stakes and all. The victims lay in neat rows on either side of the rectangular bed.

"What the hell?" Marilyn asked, summing up the situation.

By then I was stepping up onto the farmhouse's listing front porch. A bumper sticker had been pasted to the little gable above the porch. "Second Amendment Spoken Here." Beneath it, the front door was standing open, its job being done by a patched screen door. I had a flashback to the deserted office at J&S Towing. Nevertheless, I knocked before trying the screen door. It wasn't latched.

"You don't believe in signs?" Marilyn asked from down on the drive. "This Pardee is a gun nut. You go in there, you're giving him a free shot."

"Mr. Pardee?" I called out. Like my earlier knocking, the words seemed to live on for a long time inside the house. "Stay there," I told Marilyn. "If you see anyone, whistle."

The front room smelled of old cigarette smoke and sweat. The whole house probably did, but I stopped noticing fairly quickly. I was too busy trying to decide whether the house had been searched. Like the barn, it was a mess, things scattered every-

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where, junk mail and back issues of hunting magazines mostly. But that might just have been Pardee's way of keeping house.

The question got black and white as soon as I entered the bedroom. There I found a full-size bed completely disassembled. The footboard and headboard leaned against facing walls to my right and left. The mattress slumped against the wall facing me, blocking most of the light from the room's only window. The box spring stood next to the doorway, not leaning at all. I stepped into the gloom, tripping on the bed rails and slats, and confirmed what I'd glimpsed from the doorway: The mattress had been slit open from corner to corner.

Marilyn's whistle interrupted what might have been a very long reverie on the subject of the bed. I went out through a back door and found her standing near her station wagon, looking out toward the road. A man was looking back from the road's far side. He was big and dressed in a T-shirt as long as a nightshirt. He had shoulder-length hair that looked silvery in the last of the sunlight.

"Can we go, Keane?" Marilyn asked. "The greenheads are starting to bite."

"Where did he come from?"

"The last house we passed on the right. I saw him step out just as we were turning in here. He must watch the place for Pardee."

Watching was all he seemed interested in doing at the moment. "It's time for dinner, I think," I said.

A spigot poked through the brick foundation of the house on the driveway side. I turned it on and let it run for a moment, Marilyn and the man with the silver hair both watching me. Then I turned it off and scraped up two handfuls of sandy mud. I smeared one handful across the station wagon's front license plate and the other across the rear plate.

"What's going on?" Marilyn demanded, her earlier mellowness already halfway to a hangover.

"Whatever it is," I said, "I don't like it."

We drove out past the watching man. At the last second, I thought to put my hand over my bandage.

6.

Marilyn's displeasure lasted through dinner at a roadside hamburger stand named Doc's, through the uneventful night, and well into breakfast the next morning. She brightened somewhat toward the end of that meal, the thaw coinciding with my request that she drop me at the nearest rental-car agency.

Marilyn was so happy about the plan that she generously offered to drive me up to Atlantic City, much closer to my home.

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That would make dropping the car back off easier, she argued. And keep me from coming anywhere near Cape May again while she was there, I thought. Whatever her motive, Marilyn deposited me at a Budget Car Rental on Route Thirty. She was gone before the clerk had finished explaining the damage waiver.

For once, I was happy enough to be deserted, as I was feeling distinctly like a lightning rod. I rented the cheapest car on the lot—a Dodge Neon described by the clerk as green, but actually chartreuse—and drove to my little house in Mystic Island.

After I'd showered, I felt a little less stiff and sore but no easier. I paced through my few rooms until my knee started to ache, then went out to sit on the edge of the marina where my neighbors docked their boats. I left the sliding door on the back of the house open in case Deputy Nelson or John Pardee or my insurance agent called. No one did, not even Marilyn to see if I'd gotten home all right.

When the sun got too warm for sitting, I fished in my wallet for Nelson's phone number. I came up instead with Manny Vu's address in Jersey City. Before I could talk myself out of it, I was headed north on the Garden State Parkway, trying to hear the Neon's tinny radio over the whine of its transmission.

I hadn't thought to rescue my well-worn state map from the Cavalier, so I was navigating by a complimentary Budget map, which was far from detailed. In fact, it seemed to suggest that there were large parts of New Jersey that hadn't been explored, a feeling I'd sometimes had myself. Luckily, I'd thought to consult an old atlas before leaving my house. It had told me that Jersey City was situated on the Hudson at the western end of the Holland Tunnel, that it was a shipping and manufacturing center founded in 1630 by the Dutch, traces of whom could still be found, notably a statue of Peter Stuyvesant. More helpful was a street map that showed Manny Vu's street, McClelland Street. It was very near the river.

So I took the parkway to the New Jersey Turnpike and the turnpike north to the last exit before the Hudson. I'd seen the exit many times, the sign for the New York ferry always catching my eye. The ferry operation turned out to be bigger than I'd imagined. According to its signage, it catered to theater and museum goers as well as humble commuters. I passed a row of modern blue and white boats and block after block of fenced parking lots, occupying ground that must once have held warehouses.

At a private lot just outside the ferry company's chain-link fence, I asked for McClelland Street. The old man at the lot's gate—a rope between two oil drums—told me it was one block up the street I was on, Pike.

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"But you'll never squeeze a car in there," he added. "Not even a mouse car like that."

I took the hint and left the Neon with him, paying the daily rate, the only rate he offered. The climb to McClelland Street was short but steep. Halfway there, Pike's asphalt paving ended in an irregular line that looked like a wave of spilled crude. From there up, the pavement was brick, so old Peter Stuyvesant might once have trod it.

McClelland Street seemed to be paved with people. Asian people. The street was an open-air produce market, crowded with shoppers at what my stomach told me was half-past lunchtime. In addition to fruits and vegetables, some of which I actually recognized, stands sold smoked and fresh fish, cooked and uncooked chickens—the cooked ones hanging by their feet—and dry goods, no can or box of which had a label I could read.

For that matter, I couldn't understand most of what was being said by the busy people around me. Even at the stand where I bought some grilled meat on a stick, the only two words of English I recognized were "three" and "dollars."

Fifty-two McClelland Street was on the far edge of the market block, a narrow brick building whose first floor was a jewelry shop. I asked there for Manny Vu. The proprietor directed me to a stairway in an alley between Fifty-two and its neighbor.

When I was halfway up the metal stairs, a door opened off the landing at the top and a young Asian woman stepped out. She was barefoot, dressed in jeans and a Knicks T-shirt, her black hair lying loose across her shoulders. When she saw me, her face fell. It was beautiful nonetheless.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Sorry for bothering you. I'm looking for Manny Vu."

"He's not here," she said, her only accent a north Jersey one. She'd held the door open behind her. Now she backed toward it.

"He and I were in an accident yesterday," I said, speaking quickly. "Down near Cape May. I was wondering if he was okay."

I was also wondering whether this was the girl Deputy Nelson had spoken to on the phone. I decided she was. She'd frozen in place the moment I'd mentioned the accident.

"Come in, please," she said.

7.

The doorway off the iron landing opened directly onto a living room, dark and warm and crowded with furniture. In one corner, a television played softly. I recognized the movie, the original *Ghostbusters,* but not the dialogue, which had been redubbed. Hunched next to the television on the end of a sofa was a hairless

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old man wrapped in a heavy robe. He was watching the screen with rapt, unsmiling attention.

The old man didn't notice me until the young woman switched off the VCR beneath the color set. Then he smiled, almost toothlessly. The woman spoke to him in something that sounded to me like Chinese, her words so fast and flat that I could barely spot the breaks between them. He replied briefly. Then she turned to me.

"I told my grandfather that you were in the accident with my brother. He said he'd noticed that you'd been hurt. I'm sorry I didn't myself."

"It's nothing," I said.

"Can you tell us what happened? The deputy who calls is too busy consoling us to give us much information. She frightens me."

I told them about the accident, laying the blame on the wet roads. The woman translated softly as I went. The old man nodded once, after I'd mentioned the Cape May ferry. I ended by repeating the question about Manny's condition. His sister hesitated for a long time, as though expecting the old man to answer. "We haven't heard," she finally said.

"But you know he walked away from the hospital," I said.

Her stricken look told me that she did. To relieve that look, I asked what I thought was an innocuous follow-up. "Was Manny down south on business?"

Now the sister looked stricken and frightened. This time, the old man did break the silence. The translation was: "Would you like some tea?"

She left to make it without switching back on the VCR. I was tempted to do it myself, to distract Manny's grandfather from his examination of me. Instead, I glanced around the room. I was looking for Manny. I found him on a small table that held only the photo and a votive candle in a green metal holder. The group was a small one: the old man, a younger man who might have represented the missing generation, and two teenagers. They were Manny and his sister, I guessed. Judging by her age in the photo, it had been taken three or four years earlier. In it, Manny Vu was a smiling kid with a broad face and bushy hair. I decided that the middle-aged man was Manny's father. The background of the shot was the Hudson River and a section of the New York skyline.

New York figured in the tea service the young woman carried from the kitchen. In my mug specifically, which bore the ubiquitous "I ❤ New York" slogan.

The old man used his mug as a hand warmer and began to speak. The young woman translated, sitting beside him on the couch.

"You noticed the picture of Manny and his father. We four

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escaped from Vietnam together in nineteen eighty-five. We were three weeks in an open boat and six months in a refugee camp in Thailand."

Listening to the sad-eyed woman, I got the sense that she knew the story so well and had heard her grandfather's version so often that she was summarizing as much as translating.

"Then we were allowed to come to this country. Manny's father, our father, still had American friends from the army. They helped him get a job here. Working on the ferry boats."

I looked at the group portrait again, noting for the first time the metal railing against which the four stood and the invisible breeze that blew strands of hair across the girl's face and stood Manny's up in front. The photograph had been taken on the deck of one of the ferries.

"My grandfather says that's why Manny took the ferry ride down south. He was visiting, in a way, with his father, who died two years ago in an accident on the river. Manny was reconciling with his father yesterday, Grandfather thinks. Reconciling with his death. Manny hasn't been the same since our father died. He couldn't accept it. He wouldn't go near the Hudson ferry boats. He wouldn't accept a job from the ferry company when they offered him one."

The old man talked on for a long time, but the woman was silent and, I thought, alarmed. When he finished, she said, "My brother was a good man. He was raised to be good always. Our father's death hurt him, opened him up to the many dark temptations of this country. Now my grandfather knows that Manny is safe. When he stepped onto that ferry, he turned his back on the darkness. My grandfather thanks you for bringing him word of this."

She looked considerably less grateful herself as she stood up expectantly. I set down my mug and stood, too. Manny's grandfather and I exchanged nods, then I was out on the iron landing, suspended between the sounds of the street market and the noise of the river traffic.

I turned to the girl, startling her. "I forgot to tell you my name. I want to give you my phone number, too."

She held up her hand. "It's better we don't know," she said.

8.

I got back to Mystic Island just in time to take a long, unpleasant call from my insurance agent. I'd run in from the carport to catch the ringing phone, certain it was Marilyn. When my doorbell rang later that evening, I jumped to the same hopeless conclusion.

The person I found on my doorstep was a woman. And she was about Marilyn's age: late thirty-something. She may even have been a New Yorker. She held herself like one: erect, head back,

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her slightly beaked nose sniffing the Mystic air critically. But she wasn't on vacation. I deduced that from her tailored tan slacks and a sleeveless white blouse of some soft matte material—and from the badge she flashed me.

"Mr. Keane? My name is Nancy Wildridge. I work for the ATF. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms."

"I hope you're here about alcohol," I said. "I don't stock the other two."

Wildridge passed up the opportunity to display her smile. "Actually, I'm not. May I come in?"

She gave my living room a once-over and said, "This was built as a weekend getaway, right? The whole street was. How did you ever find this hole-in-the-wall?"

I wasn't sure whether she meant the house or Mystic Island. "It's my uncle's place. I'm watching it for him."

"What else do you do, Mr. Keane?"

"At the moment, I seem to be answering questions. I'm not sure why."

Wildridge gave off checking a dusty bookcase for fingerprints and considered me. "That alcohol you mentioned, what form does it take?"

"Beer."

"Sounds good."

By the time I'd collected two bottles, Wildridge had exited via the rear sliding door. I found her staring down into the lagoon. I handed her her beer and steeled myself for more by-play. But that part of the scene was over.

"I understand you were involved in a traffic accident with a man named Manny Vu."

"Yes," I said. "Do you know what happened to him?"

"Only in general terms." She picked up a pebble from my pebbled backyard and tossed it into the lagoon. "That happened to him."

"I don't understand."

"He disappeared, Mr. Keane. More precisely, he was made to disappear. Given all the water you folks have around here, I wouldn't be surprised if he's in some right now. Way over his head."

"You think he's dead?"

The agent was watching the ripples she'd caused on the glassy lagoon. "What do you know about John Pardee?" she finally asked.

"He towed my car to Rio Grande, where it was broken into. I tried to talk to him about it, but he'd . . ."

"Disappeared too?" Wildridge suggested. "So did his truck." She picked up two more pebbles but must have decided the business was too theatrical, because she dropped them at her feet.

"Neither one has turned up. We're trying to trace two people who stopped by Pardee's house last night. Man and a woman.

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Man looked something like you, although our witness, a nosy neighbor, didn't mention anything like that patch on your forehead. He didn't get their license-plate number, either. The man smeared the plates with mud. That's an odd thing to do, don't you think? An innocent man might stop by to discuss something—to complain about his car being broken into, for instance—but why the mud? Only a man who was up to something would do that."

"Or a man who had stumbled into something, who had found something disturbing."

"Like a slashed mattress and a dozen disinterred tomato plants?"

"And a nosy neighbor."

Wildridge took a long drink from her sweating bottle. "Whatever spooked this guy, his instincts were sound. This is definitely something you don't want to be involved in."

"Seems like I already am."

"I don't know. You're still here, aren't you? I was half expecting to find your house open and empty tonight. Maybe it will be tomorrow night."

"You're wasting it," I said. "I'm as scared as I get right now. Why don't you just tell me why the ATF is interested in Manny Vu?"

"Because it's better that you don't know."

That reminded me of Manny's sister's parting remark. "Tell his family what happened to him, then. They're desperate to find out."

"You've talked with them?"

"I was up there this afternoon."

Up until that moment, I'd felt as though I'd been dealing with a salesperson who was sure I couldn't afford anything in her shop. Now I'd suddenly produced a gold card.

"Buy me another beer," Wildridge said.

9.

We went inside for the second beer, since the mosquitoes were now siphoning it off as fast as we could drink it. Wildridge chose the kitchen table for our talk. Under the table's dangling light fixture, her prematurely dyed hair looked more red than brown.

"What did you think of the Vus?" she asked.

"They seemed like nice people."

"You were especially taken with the sister, I'll bet. Sam."

"Sam?"

"Short for Samantha. Her American name. Her late father thought his kids needed them to fit in. I don't know where he got Manny. Maybe from a Pep Boys ad."

"What happened to the mother?"

"Died before they left Vietnam. That's the story. For all I know, they ate her during the boat trip."

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"You don't think much of the family," I observed after we'd stared at each other for a time.

"What did they tell you about Manny?"

"That he was a good kid. A little shaken up over his father's death."

Wildridge was nodding and smirking at the same time. "A boy scout was Manny. A choir boy. Except you couldn't trust his singing. Did they happen to mention Shadow Street?"

"No, where's that?"

"How about a gang Manny might have belonged to?"

"No," I said again, but I was thinking of the old man's cryptic reference to dark temptations. "Is Shadow Street where this gang is located?"

"Originally. The real street is spelled S-H-A-D-O-E. Shadoe was a Civil War general, like McClelland. Jersey City liked to name streets for them, way back when. The gang members use the more conventional spelling to better reflect their method of operation, which is stealth itself. Know much about Vietnamese gangs?"

I shook my head.

"They haven't gotten the press they deserve. But they're a real problem. In New York's Chinatown, they're *the* problem. Their members are mostly young ex-refugees born into the mess we left over there after the war. They're extremely violent, ostentatiously violent, since a good bit of their income comes from protection rackets, which means it comes from fear.

"Shadow Street goes exactly the opposite way. No publicity. No public beatings or executions of uncooperative merchants. The unlucky party just disappears. It's ingenious in a way, since the gang gets the credit for any unexplained happening, whether they're involved or not. I'd congratulate their *Ank kai,* their leader, if I knew who he was. But the only gang members we know by name are the small fry."

"Like Manny Vu?"

"He was well on his way to becoming a member. Someone interrupted his initiation. Owen Keane. When Manny smacked into you yesterday, he was making his first trip as an official Shadow Street mule."

Wildridge paused to let me guess what Manny had been carrying for the gang. I considered the three options offered by the name of her bureau. "Guns?"

"Exactly. Twelve machine pistols purchased by legitimate buyers down in easygoing Virginia and passed to our boy Manny, part of a steady stream of guns headed north to New York City. Uzis or Tech-9s; Manny wasn't sure which they would be."

"Manny told you about them?" Now her earlier quip about a

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choir boy made sense. A choir boy whose singing couldn't be trusted. "Manny was an informant?"

"I thought so. I bought into his whole refugee-boy doe-eyed American-dream act. He was supposed to drive north yesterday on I-95 and stop to have coffee with me outside Philly."

"So you could take the guns?"

"We hadn't made a decision on that. Manny's potential as an informant was golden. A source inside Shadow Street would be worth a lot more than a dozen guns. But Manny took the decision away from us when he drove east out of Baltimore, crossed Delaware, and took that ferry."

"What happened after the accident?"

Wildridge had been doing most of the talking, but she'd somehow also finished her beer. She rolled the empty bottle back and forth between her hands. On each roll, it clinked against a diamond engagement ring.

"I doubt we'll ever know for sure," she said. "We do know that Deputy Nelson, one of Cape May's finest, called Sammy Vu around two-thirty, half an hour after your accident. I think little Sammy called someone connected with Shadow Street."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Most men would," Wildridge said drily. "Nevertheless, at three-thirty Manny was spirited out of the hospital."

"No one could have gotten down from Jersey City in an hour."

"I know. But the gang has branches, notably in Philadelphia. We've also heard rumors of an operation in Atlantic City, which would be close enough. Somehow the gang did it. The way Manny's bed was made up was as good as a Shadow Street calling card."

"Why would they kill him?"

"To keep him from ever talking to us."

"Are you sure it wasn't because he'd already talked to you?"

Wildridge shrugged. "Meanwhile, back in Rio Grande, a tow-truck driver named Pardee was finding the gun shipment hidden in Manny's car. Being a public-spirited citizen, he decided to keep them. I figure he had maybe an hour to stash them somewhere. Then the gang picked him up."

"And he told them where the guns were hidden?"

"That's the rub. Pardee had to know his life was at stake. So he had to have told them. Unless he pulled a gun of his own and forced the issue. But there were no reports of a gun battle around Rio Grande, and people would notice something like that down there. So I'm thinking Pardee told them, but they somehow misunderstood him. Either he tried to be cute with them, or there was some kind of language barrier or cultural barrier. None of these kids are English majors. They felt confident enough that they'd find the guns to kill Pardee. Then they didn't find them."

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"How do you know that?"

Wildridge looked at her watch and stood up. "I don't know, Mr. Keane. I'm guessing. You do a lot of that with Shadow Street. Pardee's nosy neighbor was a Vietnam vet. Yesterday evening around six he heard something that froze his blood: someone cursing in Vietnamese. He snuck up on Pardee's house and saw men in black arguing. The vet was half convinced they were Vietcong. You're lucky he didn't shoot at you when you rolled in an hour later.

"The way they were yelling at each other and the way they left Pardee's place, it wasn't Shadow Street at its best. Discipline had broken down. That's what makes me think they didn't find the guns."

She led me to the front door. On the threshold, she turned and handed me two bits of paper. One was her business card. The other was the slip of hospital notepaper on which I'd written Marilyn's number for Deputy Nelson. "You might suggest to your lady friend that she cut her vacation short. I don't think the gang can trace her, but it's better to be safe."

"What do I cut short?" I asked.

"Good question. Since you've introduced yourself to Sammy Vu, I don't know what advice to give you."

"She wouldn't let me tell her my name."

Wildridge pondered that for a time in the darkness of the carport. Then she asked, "What were you looking for at Pardee's?"

"Answers, not guns."

"I'd settle for the guns. I'd take one up to Jersey City and wave it at the Vus to show them what a scumbag their darling Manny really was."

10.

After Nancy Wildridge left me, I drove to a convenience mart and called Marilyn, afraid to use my own phone in case some all-powerful gang had tapped the line. I blurted out a not very coherent warning. Marilyn laughed at me and hung up. When I fell asleep hours later, I was still wondering how I would convince her, how I would convince myself that what Wildridge had told me was true. When I woke late the next morning, the answer was my first thought: Find the guns.

If the ATF agent was right, there'd been some miscommunication between Pardee and his captors. She'd offered two explanations. Either Pardee had given a false answer, or the gang members had misinterpreted what he'd said. If Pardee had lied, the guns could be anywhere. If he'd told the truth, the places Shadow Street had searched were clues to what he'd told them. To find the guns, I only had to identify Pardee's answer and interpret it correctly.

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That and risk my life. I spent the morning trying to whittle the risk down mentally. The gang had already written off the guns, I told myself. Probably they'd already replaced them. And they hadn't connected me with their disappearance. If they had, I'd have disappeared myself.

Then I thought of something that made all my rationalizing obsolete. I figured out what Pardee's slashed mattress, ruined garden, and missing truck had in common. Ten minutes after that, I was headed south in my chartreuse Neon, clashing with every tree I passed.

I stopped at a parkway phone to try Marilyn again. This time she hung up between the initial and terminal syllables of my first name. With my next quarter, I called Stu Hunter of J&S Towing. My insurance agent had promised me that he'd deal with Hunter, but I was hoping he hadn't called him yet. He evidently hadn't, because Hunter didn't seem surprised to be hearing from me. I asked him to wait in his office until I got there.

As I drove through little Rio Grande, I wondered about Hunter's frame of mind, which I hadn't been able to gauge over the phone. If Agent Wildridge had told him about Shadow Street, he might greet me with a shotgun. He'd certainly be leery of any questions from me.

As it turned out, Hunter, a short man with a backwoodsman's beard, was friendly and relaxed. I decided that Wildridge had questioned him but not briefed him. He seemed genuinely confident that his partner, "old John," would turn up soon, probably hungover.

I went through the pretense of scheduling a showing of the wrecked Chevy for my claims adjuster. Then I steered the conversation back to Pardee. "I was here in the waiting room when you tried to radio him the afternoon of the accident," I said. "You called him something odd. Was it Clammer?"

"Right," Hunter said. "His CB handle. John's Clammer and I'm Crabber on account of he clams all the time and I prefer to catch crabs. There's at least a little art to netting a crab off a piling or trapping one. Doesn't take any brains to rake up a clam. Edible rock collecting, that's what I call it."

That confirmed the guess I'd made about the strange basket rakes I'd found in Pardee's barn. "Where do you clam around here?"

"More places all the time, since the water's gotten cleaner. Almost any water that's shallow enough to walk around in or work from a skiff at low tide. For old John, though, there's only one place. His ancestral clam bed, he calls it. Claims it's belonged to his family since the Revolution, which is bullshit. It's a swampy little inlet off Jarvis Sound."

I looked blank and pointed west. Hunter patiently pointed east. "It's out at the end of Sanderling Road, past the bird sanctuary."

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"Can you catch crabs there?" I asked, having learned all I'd hoped to learn.

"Hell no," Hunter said, and launched into an exhaustive description of blue-shell crabs. I listened for half an hour, until I was certain my clam questions had been safely buried. As I left, I casually mentioned that my insurance agent would call to finalize the details.

At a Route Nine filling station I asked for Sanderling Road and was told to follow the signs for the famous bird sanctuary. I passed this landmark a few minutes later, after a lonely drive through weedy mud flats on a narrow two-lane. The road continued past the sanctuary entrance but seemed uncertain about the decision. As was I.

Half a mile later the road ended at a metal barricade. I got out, kicking beer cans left by local romantics. Their tire tracks marked the sandy berm. I looked for and found a set of heavier, broader tracks, the kind a tow truck might leave. So far, so good.

I stood between the tracks and stared out at Jarvis Sound, a quiet expanse of dark blue water bordered by reeds so uniform in height they might have been regularly mowed. Running up to a muddy little beach before me was a narrow finger of the sound. John Pardee's ancestral clam bed, I hoped.

Bed was the key word, the answer to the riddle posed by Shadow Street's erratic search. Pardee's bed was the epicenter of their work in his house. A garden plot might be called a bed. A truck has a bed. Whatever Pardee had told his captors, it had had something to do with a bed. "The guns are under my bed." They'd killed him, thinking his information too simple to misconstrue. And they'd been wrong.

If my nose was any judge, it was low water. I took off my sneakers and socks, rolled up the legs of my shorts, and waded in, armed with a driftwood branch. The bottom was a sandy muck. I moved forward slowly, probing on every side with the branch and doubting furiously. How would Pardee have waterproofed the guns? He'd only had an hour to work with, less driving time. What kind of container would both keep the guns dry and not float?

I couldn't think of one. I found that I couldn't think of anything except an image Wildridge had left with me, a picture of Manny Vu's body, lying weighted down in some lonely body of water. Perhaps this water. In no time I had myself convinced that I was as likely to find Vu and Pardee as the guns. More likely.

Just as I had that thought, I scared up a snowy egret that had been crouching on a reedy bar near the mouth of the inlet. When my heart stopped racing, I found I was staring at the little island. As far as I could tell, it was dry even at high tide. I waded toward it, forgetting to prod with my stick, imagining new last words for Pardee: "The guns are behind my bed."

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The bar was half the size of a tennis court. To search it, all I had to do was climb the bank and stare. Near the center of the driest land was a pile of driftwood and uprooted reeds, some of them still green. At the bottom of the pile I found a nylon duffel bag.

11.

At two the following afternoon I stood on the observation deck of the car ferry Cape Haloran as it droned across a placid Delaware Bay. I stood at the forward railing, which overlooked the lines of parked cars and the open bow with its webbing gate. Out on the horizon, Cape May was only a flat line of blue gray, its lighthouse still a speck.

I was staring toward the cape, but I was seeing a different horizon, an island so crowded with buildings that it looked like a mountain range pushed up from the seabed. Manhattan. That was the view Manny Vu's father had had on every outbound trip of his ferry. A prospect that had symbolized opportunity for generations. And on every return trip, he'd seen what? Jersey City, with its Saigon market and its streets named for forgotten heroes of a civil war. The past.

I wondered how often Mr. Vu had thought of his voyage from Vietnam to Thailand as he'd worked on his ferry. Every day? Every trip? Never? Had he seen his round trips on the Hudson as an ironic commentary on his voyage of escape, or a constant celebration of it?

And how had Manny seen them? Did he turn down a job on the Hudson ferry because the link to his father's life and death was too strong or because the job was too small-time for him? What had he seen when he'd stood where I was now standing on the last day of his life? The promised land, or the first stop in an endless series of round trips?

The answer depended on which view of Manny was correct. Was he the good but troubled kid, or the refugee on the make? Had he ridden the ferry on that last afternoon to reestablish some link to his past, or to outsmart the law?

Or both. The more I thought about Manny, the more I saw him as somewhere between the two extremes. Not a bad kid or a good one, just a kid in a bad spot. A stranger in a very strange land, despite his American name, all of whose choices were hard ones. The hardest was the deal Wildridge had offered him: Trade your friends for a pat on the back from your new country. Trade your past for your future. That was a deal I'd never been able to go through with myself.

I hadn't believed Wildridge when she'd said the ATF hadn't made a decision regarding Manny's guns. I doubted Manny had

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believed her either. Had he still been trying to make his own decision as he'd crossed on this ferry? I opened my mind to the moment—to the sun on the water, to the fishing boats bobbing on the horizon, to the gulls keeping station in the stiff breeze—and waited for an answer, as Manny Vu might have done.

My answer came in the form of a woman in huge sunglasses, a jogging bra, and biker's shorts who poked my shoulder. Marilyn Tucci.

I'd shown up on her doorstep the evening before disguised as a pizza deliveryman, one of the Uzis hidden in my white cardboard box. Being Marilyn, she'd had to reach out and touch the thing before she'd finally believed me. Then I'd made the mistake of telling her what I intended to do with the guns, and she'd insisted on coming along. We'd taken a morning ferry to Delaware and killed an hour in colonial Lewes. Now we were on our way back.

"This is it," Marilyn said. "The water isn't going to get any deeper. There are a couple of smokers out back, but I think I can distract them."

I hadn't explained the symbolism of the ferry ride to Marilyn, so there was no point in telling her I needed more time to work on my composite picture of Manny. "Lead the way," I said.

We walked around to the rear of the ship, where Marilyn prepared to sunbathe for the enjoyment of the fantail smokers. I descended a steep metal stairway to the car deck. The deck was open on the rear of the ferry, just as it was on the front. And the stern was as open as the bow, the gap through which the cars had been driven on protected only by a net woven of broad straps.

The Neon was parked three cars from the end of the leftmost row. I walked to it casually, on the lookout for jaded commuters napping in their cars. I took a very heavy nylon duffel bag from the backseat of the compact and walked to the open stern. Once there I removed a camera from the bag and pretended to photograph the Lewes breakwater as it faded in the distance. Then I looked up at the observation deck. No one was watching me. I wondered if Marilyn was sunbathing topless. However she'd done it, she'd given me my chance.

I crouched behind a van and unzipped the bag completely. The guns were all there, boxy and ugly, wrapped in some oily toweling. They would never be used by any gang members. But they'd never be turned over to the ATF, either. I was afraid Wildridge would make good on her threat and wave one of the guns under the nose of the old man on the sofa. I'd unwittingly brought him the message that his grandson was safe. I wanted him to go on believing that. For some reason, I wanted to believe it myself.

Beyond the crash net, the ferry's wake boiled white. I tossed the guns into the wake, one by one. ●

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The Bluebird

by Alison White

"It's in the eyes, isn't it?" My daughter-in-law Kate pointed at a photo on the front page of the paper. "You can see it. The eyes of a killer. At seventeen."

But all I could see was a boy.

"And now they're practically saying it was her fault," she raged, flinging the newspaper down in disgust. "All these ex-pupils have come out of the woodwork. Why now?"

"I suppose it's safe now that he's been convicted."

The boy had a chance encounter with his ex-schoolteacher on a lonely road on a winter's night. He'd strangled her with her own scarf.

"An unpopular disciplinarian, they're saying now!" Kate scoffed. "She was probably only trying to stop them rioting. You've only got to look at him to see that he's evil. It's there in his eyes."

I didn't look at Kate then. I was afraid that she'd see evil in my eyes somehow. Because I'm a killer too.

I looked at the photo of the boy again. I couldn't see anything there that gave it away. All that was different about him was just in that moment when his path had crossed that of someone who'd hurt him—he'd snapped. On another day, in another mood, he might have shrugged the feeling off. But he'd killed her. One moment. One action. Deadly.

"I just don't know what goes on in these people's heads," Kate said. "And I've got to bring up a child in this society—how am I supposed to do that?"

It was a private tirade, so I didn't give an answer. I didn't have one.

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A prolific short story writer with over seventy tales published in magazines and broadcast on BBC radio, Alison White has made a mark in several genres besides mystery—most notably romance and women's fiction. However, she tells *EQMM* that mystery has been her favorite genre since the age of eleven, when she discovered Agatha Christie. Ms. White's latest tale is an atmospheric WWII historical.

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"Where is Jenny anyway?" she muttered. "How long does it take to carry a box downstairs?"

"She's probably got distracted and is looking through it." I'd promised to help my granddaughter with her school project about the Second World War and had sent her upstairs for a box of stuff I'd dug out for her this afternoon.

She'd come here straight from school with her mother and thrown her cartoon lunchbox on the table, excited. "You're going to help me with my homework, aren't you, Gran?"

I was her age, ten, when the war started. An innocent child. But I hadn't carried a lunchbox to school. I'd carried a gas-mask.

Kate was giving me that apologetic smile of hers. "I'll go and chase her. It's really good of you to help her like this. Did you find any photos?" She was hesitant, knowing I generally didn't like talking about the war.

"There's one of Frank, my husband," I said. "In uniform."

"Jenny! Where are you?" Kate was at the foot of the stairs in pursuit. "He's a hero. It's nice that she can show them her grandfather."

But that wasn't what I had said. I'd said my husband. And yes, Jenny could be proud of Frank Bray. Poor Frank. He joined up as a boy and never lived to be a man. He died serving his king and country, and I had the telegram to prove it. They were macabre things to show a child. But they typified the war for me. The waste.

"She was lying on the floor stroking the cat, would you believe." Kate ushered Jenny into the room. "She hadn't even opened the box!"

"We'll sit at the table," I suggested. "It'll be easier."

"Can't you eat that later?" Kate said, as Jenny chewed on a long orange sweet bar of some sort and stretched it between her teeth.

"It's all right," I said. "She's enjoying it."

"Well don't get it on your book," Kate warned. "I'll make Gran a nice cup of tea."

Jenny rolled her eyes as she put the wrapper back around the half-chewed bar. "I'll finish it later." She rummaged in her school bag for her project book and put it down on the table. "I've got to ask you some questions and draw some pictures, okay?"

"Fine." I smiled at her matter-of-fact approach. None of it was real to her. And maybe it was better that way.

"Do you really remember it all, Gran?" I could smell the orange sweet on her breath as she looked up at me.

"Some. I was only your age when it started." But older, and a mother-to-be when it ended.

"What do you remember about it most, then?"

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The knowledge that evil lived in every one of us. But I couldn't tell her that.

Jenny sighed, impatient with me. I'm still getting used to my granddaughter being around the place. I don't think I'm what Kate would call a "natural mother." I've not been close to my son Ken, although he's been a good lad so far. I always worried how he'd turn out. Still do.

He didn't marry till late, too busy carving out a career, working abroad, seeing the world. Then he met Kate, and Jenny followed three years later. But they only came back to live in this town a year ago. So suddenly I have a family nearby, and I'm not allowed to keep myself to myself anymore.

That's Kate's doing, of course. Ken was used to my ways, but I can see that Kate's determined to cast me in the role of doting mother and grandmother.

Poor Ken. He's grown up a decent man, in spite of me. So far.

"This is the front cover of my book," Jenny said proudly, holding up her booklet. "I printed it out on the computer."

"My War," it said, and there were pictures of aeroplanes on the front.

"There's a space for me to draw you, 'cause it's you I'm interviewing," she said. "Did you go in an aeroplane, Gran? Is that what you remember most?"

"No."

"Well, what can I say you remember? Teacher said it could be things like food or songs or—"

"Songs," I said. "There's one about bluebirds. The words are in here." I rummaged through the box and handed her the faded song sheet. Underneath it was the photograph of my husband. Frank Bray. He was little more than a child. A local lad. Older than me, but with the shortage of teachers, classes were often lumped together at school and I remembered him tying my ribbon to the hinge on his desk once as it trailed behind me, then slamming the desk shut and making my eyes water.

I'd hated him after that. I thought he was mad. But he'd followed me round for years. Always with that silly expectant grin. He had it on in the photograph. A boy, barely shaving, with a pigeon chest, in a soldier's uniform and a silly grin. Poor Frank.

"Is that Granddad?" Jenny took the photo. "He looks a happy man."

I smiled down at her. "I think he was, love, mostly. He was certainly a happy boy. Always teasing the girls in school."

"I've never seen that picture." Kate was behind me now. "He was so young—a child."

"Things were different then," I said, and felt Kate's hand gently patting my shoulder.

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"Oh, I didn't mean anything. I know how it was then, you had to grab your happiness while you could. I'm sorry."

Five minutes ago, Kate was raving on about killers and how you could spot the evil in their eyes. Now she's looking at me with pity. Thinking of my life as she sees it, devoted to my dead husband. Maybe you can only see what you look for.

You grew up fast in wartime. Responsibilities were given out from early on. And there was a spirit of togetherness—I do remember that. But it was still bleak. You clung together simply because you never knew when your time might run out. When the bombs dropped, whole streets could be wiped out. One day you could go to bed happy. The next, there might be no children left in your street to play with. It happened.

And what Kate said, about grabbing happiness when you could—yes, there was an element of that, too. There was an element of grabbing every opportunity, good or bad. Like the "evil" killer she'd spoken about before. He'd grabbed an opportunity. A bad one. We all took chances sometimes. Me included . . .

*

"Sally, you can't go out in this! It's going to pour down!"

"Well, I'm going, Mum. I haven't spent the last half-hour doing my hair for nothing. Most of the boys I was at school with are joining up now—we've got to see them off. Those that are left."

"Of course, love. I know. Just . . . be careful, that's all. You'll be like a drowned rat by the time you get there. You'll be lucky if you even get a dance."

The rain wasn't too bad, and I covered my hair, feeling sure the style would survive the journey. There were hardly any lights visible because of the blackout, but I knew the roads so I took a shortcut down Rankin Street. It had been bombed the week before; most of the street was down save for the big house at the end. It was empty; it had taken some damage from the blasts but was still standing and the roof was still on. Halfway down the road the air-raid warning went off. Stuck between home and the church hall—the nearest air-raid shelter was near our house. If I went home, I'd get caught up with looking after kids and I'd never get to the dance. So I ran to the house at the end of the street; I'd shelter in there. It had escaped the blast once, so maybe would do it again.

I pushed the door open and stepped over the rubble, coughing as a piece of plaster fell down, scattering dust around me. There was the thick taste of soot too, still lingering as it always did after a blast. It was still in the house from last time. The light fixture swung over my head and I picked my way through to the doorway of what used to be a main room.

"Who's there?" A voice came out of the darkness and a man

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stepped out of the shadows. I was not the only one who'd had the idea to shelter there.

"Well, well. Sally. Fancy meeting you here."

Jimmy Malone kicked a piece of wood out of his way and stepped towards me.

"I thought the shelter was too far away," I said. I didn't like Jimmy much. He was the cocky sort. Always getting into fights and running round with girls. His mother had been glad when he'd been called up. At least then she'd know where he was.

"Anyone else in the street?" he asked suddenly, stepping towards what used to be the window and craning his neck to see outside through a crack in the boards that had been knocked into place.

"I didn't see anyone."

He smirked, "Just you and me then."

He kicked and picked his way through the rubble and over to an alcove in the far wall, and bent down, clearing a space. "We'd better sit down, Sally."

"I'm okay—" But I lurched forward and fell to my knees as the house shook as the first bomb fell over in the distance.

I scrabbled over to the alcove and sat next to him. It was someone, wasn't it? Another person in this madness. If I was going to die—then at least I wasn't on my own.

"You're trembling." His eyes were on my legs, where I'd fallen and laddered my stockings. I'd borrowed them from my sister Stella. They were her last pair but I'd begged them for the dance.

"I'm okay." It wasn't like this in the air-raid shelters. I'd always been with lots of people before when the sirens had gone off. Mum even got us singing in there—and it just didn't seem so bad then. You had to keep going when your brothers and sisters were there with you. Fighting, laughing. You did it for them.

He was still staring at me. "You're okay, you reckon? I can see that. More than okay," he said in a sort of whisper, and licked his lips.

"Leave off, Jimmy." I wished I'd gone back now. Why had I gone in there? What if they were bombing our road? I'd have to go back anyway, never mind the dance, just to make sure everyone was all right.

"Not scared of me, are you? I'm here keeping you safe, aren't I? From the Germans."

"Well, they're not in here, are they?" I didn't look at him.

He laughed and stretched, folding his arms behind his head. Bracing himself, then, as more bombs fell outside. "Jesus! They're not far away, though."

I closed my eyes against the falling dust and plaster. "That one sounded really near, Jimmy."

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"They'll be in the shelter."

"It didn't help those in Smith—" I stopped mid-sentence. Jimmy had lost his brother when the shelter on Smith Street was hit. I could see the pain in his eyes at the memory as he stared into the distance. He was so close to me now I could feel the warmth of his body as his leg rested against mine. See the sweat beading his upper lip.

"No," he said slowly. "It didn't, you're right. And we don't know, do we? How long we've got. And I'm off soon. To meet the Germans face-to-face. I might never come back, Sally."

"You will." I looked away. "Bad penny you are."

He turned to look at me, and I could smell his breath, he was so near. It was sour. There was a cut just above his lip as though he'd nicked himself shaving.

"Have you been drinking, Jimmy?"

"Have you been drinking, Jimmy?" he mimicked my voice and laughed. "Have you agreed to die for your country, Jimmy? Good lad! But don't drink, don't mess about with girls—just get yourself killed."

"You shouldn't be wasting your money on beer and stuff. Fancy being able to drink yourself stupid when there's all kinds of things rationed. Things that people really need!"

"Listen to Miss Goody-goody." He was up then, on his knees in front of me. Staring right into my face. "Wasting my money, am I? I mightn't have it for long. And yes, things are rationed. What about you? Anyone had a share of you tonight? Going to the dance all prettied up. Have you thought—we might not get there, you know. We might not get out of here alive. Not if the Germans get us first."

"Jimmy!"

Now I could *see* he had been drinking. I could barely see the colour of his eyes, his pupils were so dilated. He looked scared and yet exhilarated at the same time. Excited. He reached out and touched my face and I jerked away from him.

"Don't."

"What's up? Don't you like the nasty man?"

Although his eyes were looking at me, they were vacant, distant. He didn't see me. Not really.

"Jimmy, stop it!"

"Jimmy, stop it!" he mimicked. "Jimmy just does as he's told, you know. Jimmy's going to war."

"I know that. Let go of me!"

He had hold of my wrist and was pulling me towards him. "Don't you want to be nice to the soldier, Sally? Don't you want to send him on his way happy? He could be dead next week."

I made a move sideways but he pushed me back into the alcove.

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"Don't, Sally. There's just you and me. There's nowhere to go, is there, while there's all that lot going on? Let's just have some fun."

There was almost a pleading note in his voice, but I pushed his arm away.

"I've told you, Jimmy. Stop messing about, will you."

"We might never get to the dance, you know. There might be no band to dance to. There mightn't be anyone left in the street. Who'll want to dance then?"

"I don't want to dance now, Jimmy. I just want to sit here in peace till—"

"Till when? Till the bombs drop? Till we die? Oh, come on, Sally, there's got to be more to life than this."

He leaned forward to kiss me, touching my cheek with his fingers. "You do look good, though." He smelled of drink and sweat and soap. And fear. He was only a boy, I told myself. I'd known him for years. He wouldn't hurt me. He was inches away from my face as he bent to kiss me. I pulled away again and he grabbed me by the hair, pulling my head back against the wall, kissing me roughly, biting my lip and holding me down.

As he pulled away, still holding me, I spat out at him. It was the worst thing I could have done.

"Oh, Sally wants to fight, does she?" It seemed to excite him.

"No, Jimmy!"

"Let me die for you, though, wouldn't you?"

He stood up, his shadow cast across the crumbling wall, disjointed and menacing, and the shadow didn't look like Jimmy anymore, but a man. Towering over me in the darkness, angry and tall. I knew it was Jimmy, I knew it, and he was as scared as me, wasn't he? He was. But *his* fear was giving him a strength that frightened me even more as he began to undo his belt.

There was no way I could have stopped him. I kicked, squirmed, yelled, and lashed out at him with my fingernails, scratching at his face, but he had me pinned down. All the while, the bombs whistled overhead, blocking out my cries. His breath was ragged and hot as he tore at my dress, pulling and squeezing at me, groaning as he climbed on top of me. Silencing me with his mouth in a cruel and brutal way. His eyes were open, but he still wasn't looking at me. He wasn't looking at anything, except maybe some picture in his head, as his wrists held my hands down and my fingers and knuckles bled as they scraped rhythmically against the rubble.

When he'd finished, only then did he look at me.

"There now." He was breathless, his face flushed and his eyes

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bright. Somehow, despite the animal behaviour he looked more human now. "That wasn't so bad, was it, Sally?"

I didn't speak. Couldn't speak. Just pulled my dress around me and tried not to show how much I was crying. I rubbed my leg where it hurt; a piece of wood had been digging into me but it had been something to fix my mind on—think about that while he pounded away at me—other than what was happening to the rest of my body.

Jimmy turned his back on me and began to fasten his clothes. "We might all be dead next week."

I could taste his blood on my lip. Still feel the scratches on my face where his unshaven cheek had scraped. My body felt bruised. Used.

Another bomb, not far away, whistled and landed with a thud, the room shook, and more rubble fell around us. Jimmy sat a few yards away, his back to me. And then he yawned.

The noise, the dust seemed to swirl about me and suddenly it mattered. The yawn. How could he sit there yawning? After . . . after that?

The blood seemed to pound in my head and I lunged over at him in fury. He was on his feet before I got there and held me away from him, his fingers gripping tight around my already bruised wrists. I kicked and twisted in his grasp and he pushed me down onto the floor.

"Stop it, Sally. We might be here all night yet. Save your energy. You might need it again later." And he turned his back on me again.

There was grit and dust on the floor digging into my palms. My hands hurt; there were shards of glass beneath them. There were pieces of wood all over the floor, bits of window frame. I picked one up in my hand and then threw myself towards Jimmy and struck him on the head with a cry and all the force I could muster. I watched him fall to the floor. And then I hit him again.

*

"Did you paint seams down the back of your legs?" Jenny was asking. "With gravy browning?"

"Sometimes." I had to close my eyes in order to focus on her. We were here in my house and I was a grandmother. Not a young girl.

"Why didn't you use felt pen?"

"There were no felt pens then, Jenny."

She looked appalled at the thought.

*

I don't know how long I'd been there when I heard a noise at the front of the house. I didn't move. Just stayed there in the corner when the door creaked open and Frank Bray walked in.

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With one glance he took in my torn dress and stockings, the mark on my face, the blood on my mouth, and my tears.

"What the—" and then he saw Jimmy.

I didn't say anything. I just sat there and watched him take it all in. Saw the angry, tight set of Frank's mouth and the colour draining from his face. He went and felt around Jimmy's neck. But there was no pulse there to find.

"Sally, come on." His voice was thick.

I shook my head.

"Sally!" He was kneeling beside me and bent to brush my hair out of my eyes as it flopped across my face, but I flinched.

"I'm sorry." He backed off. "But Sally, you can't stay here. We can't stay here."

"It doesn't matter," I said.

"It does. Come on. Leave him, Sally. I promise you you're safe with me."

"I just—"

"I know. I know. We'll sort it out. He can't hurt you anymore now, Sally. It's okay."

We were two streets away when the bomb hit the house in Rankin Street. Frank ran back to the end of the road and saw it. I don't think there was much left of Jimmy.

Frank and I were married a week later by special licence. I never knew what he said to my mother, but guessed. She gave her consent and although she worried about my youth, she had a sneaking respect for Frank.

"The lad's honest, love, and he really cares for you. And such a nice smile he's got. I can see why you fell for him. And God knows, there's not enough time, is there, to wait. You just don't know what'll happen. . . ."

Frank never laid a finger on me in the short time we had before he went away to fight. He never knew before he left if he had saved me from disgrace by marrying me. But he had. And he never knew the child that took his name.

I can see it clear as day now, that moment when I opened the front door at my mum's house and saw the telegram boy's bike. He'd propped it up against the wall and was peering through the windows, as I'd been out in the backyard and, heavy and awkward with pregnancy, it took me awhile to walk through to answer.

I knew even before I saw the boy's face.

"Think of your baby," they all whispered as I sank into despair.

"You can be proud," Mum said through her tears. "Your baby's father was a good honest lad who died for his country."

*

But of course, he wasn't. My baby's father was a rapist. And his mother a killer. What chance did my son have?

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Somehow I'd kept going through the years. I cared for my son and always made sure he wanted for nothing. But I didn't want to love him—I didn't know how he'd turn out.

"So you were a war widow then, Gran?" Jenny was on another page in her booklet.

"That's right." Barely seventeen. And I never remarried.

I saw Kate give her a warning look. "Gran won't want to say too much about that side of things, love—losing people. Remember, it was real and she lived through it. And she lost her husband. The love of her life."

Oh, poor Frank. I never had a love of my life. I could never love anyone after that day. I was changed forever.

Kate was smiling at me; she really was quite pretty, my daughter-in-law, her hair the same buttery shade as Jenny's when the light caught it. And she'd made my son happy. Given him the love that he so needed.

She was spelling out a word for Jenny, "o . . . w. . . that's it. You know, there was a spirit then that we just don't have now. I don't want to glamorise it, you know that." She gave a little shudder. "But being under pressure like that, well, it can bring out the best in some people, can't it?"

"And the worst," I said. "Don't forget that."

She looked at Frank's photo again. While Jenny was busy, head bent down writing, she jerked her head towards the photo of the boy in the newspaper. The murderer.

"About the same age," she mouthed. "But what a difference."

"Frank got medals for killing people," I said.

Kate looked shocked. "There was a war on."

But that boy all over the news now, that she condemned so much, had just lashed out at someone who'd hurt him. I understood. It didn't make what happened right, of course not. But I understood. And I pitied him. It frightened me that I felt like that. But I, of all people, know what lies ahead for that boy. He took an opportunity. And now he has to pay. And he will.

I'd never cried over the years. I didn't let myself. It wouldn't change anything, and I always felt I didn't deserve a release of any sort. I didn't deserve anything. I've just been . . . empty.

Ken loves me. And he wants his family to love me too. I . . . I don't know what I feel for him. I care—but I don't know how deep that goes. I really don't. I've never let myself think too much.

"I've nearly finished these questions," Jenny said, picking some of the remaining chewy sweet out of her teeth. "There's just one more." She sucked the end of her finger noisily.

"Well, hurry," Kate said, impatient now, "Gran's getting tired."

"Look." Jenny held her book up for us to see. "It's the last page."

"What did you learn from the war?" The question was printed

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with a blank line below so the children could write in the answer. Underneath that was a printed picture of a bird.

"Let Gran think about that!" Kate said. "It's important."

"I'll colour in the bird while you do."

"Leave it white," Kate suggested "For peace."

Jenny's lip curled. "But it looks boring. What was that song before about bluebirds? Did they come, Gran, and make it better?"

"See what you can do with this," I said, handing her a blue felt pen.

Smiling, she began to fill in the crude outline. Kate had lost interest again and was reading the paper, but Jenny, keen now that the end was in sight, had concentration etched into her little face as she worked.

Finally, she carefully positioned a black beady eye onto the bird and smiled up at me, her eyes as bright a blue as the bird she had just created. "Well, Gran? What did you learn?"

So many things. But it was stuff I didn't want to think about anymore—memories that had haunted me for so long. And yet . . . I owed her a truthful answer. Kate was right. It was an important question. And Jenny deserved respect. She'd given it to me.

"Gran?"

As I looked down at her serious face, flushed pink, I felt a sudden surge of tenderness. It was a strange feeling, and I liked it. Jenny was *good.* Despite everything . . . despite me . . . Jenny was untouched and innocent. She was hope for the future.

"Have you got an answer?" Her pen was poised over the blank line.

"Just three words, Jenny, and it's the truth for me. I think I've only just learned it now. You see, everything that happened, happened. It can't be changed but it's gone."

"Go on. I'll write it as you say it."

I took a deep breath, then told her, "Never look back."

Without looking up, she wrote the words almost without thinking, in her childish looped handwriting. Carefully she placed her full stop, then sat back and read the sentence aloud. The page was neat, the words clear, the little bluebird there underneath them.

"Never look back," she repeated and gazed up at me. And then, as she looked at me, she smiled and her eyes softened. I knew she could read something in my face. Not evil. Not that. But whatever it was—just for that moment, it was something that even a child understood.

"Then don't," she said simply and closed the book. "Don't look back on it ever again." She stretched up and kissed me, her mouth still sticky from where she'd been chewing her sweets.

"Thanks, Gran," she said, and started to pack her pens and pencils up. "I'm really pleased with the way that's turned out."

And then I turned away. So she wouldn't see me cry. ●

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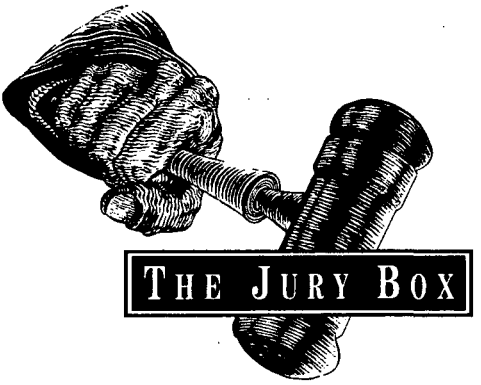

by Jon L. Breen

How seriously can you take dust-jacket quotes from the famous? Usually not very, since they are more often gestures of friendship or payback than literary criticism. If they come from show business personalities or from writers whose own work you don't admire, you can disregard them entirely or use them as a reverse recommendation. Blurbs from writers you respect are more problematic: Some, especially those who blurb frequently, are much better friends than critics; others feel duty-bound not to mislead their fans. Stephen King's head-on comparisons with other writers in his jacket quote on Tess Gerritsen's novels make it clear he's serious: "better than [Michael] Palmer, better than [Robin] Cook . . . yes, even better than [Michael] Crichton." It was the third claim that got my attention. But can Gerritsen possibly live up to the hype? She can.

**** Tess Gerritsen: *Gravity,* Pocket, $24.95. In a medical thriller as much science fiction as suspense, a mysterious malady afflicts astronauts working on an international space station, among them medical officer Emma Watson, whose estranged husband and fellow physician Jack McCallum desperately tries to save her. A believable picture of the politics and procedures of NASA combines with the internist author's medical expertise and gift for pace, character, and construction to make this an absolutely riveting novel, one that will send new readers scurrying to find her previous three. (My thriller consultant advises that one of those, 1998's *Bloodstream* [Pocket, $6.99], though not quite as good as *Gravity,* is still to be recommended.)

*** Robert Greer: *Limited Time,* Mysterious, $23.95. Another medical thriller, the fourth novel about Denver bail bondsman-sleuth C.J. Floyd, was the first new book with a Y2K publication date to come to this reviewer. Its ingenious "high concept" plot involves a drug

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that improves athletic performance dramatically but has deadly side effects, and the author has an insider's medical research expertise. The writing, casting, and cinematic structure are more routine, but the finishing surprise is nicely managed.

**** H. R. F. Keating: *Bribery, Corruption Also,* St. Martin's, $23.95. Inspector Ghote, whose heart belongs to Bombay, travels to Calcutta when wife Protima, a native of that quite different city, inherits a large house she remembers fondly from her childhood. The couple encounter one setback after another and gain new insights into the shady practices of the title. Like some other latter-day Ghotes, this is more a seriocomic mainstream novel than a mystery. Keating's eye for detail and ear for dialect are typically sharp in a novel notable for Protima's largest role ever, insights into Indian city rivalry, and probing of the complexities of ethics and morality.

*** Nancy Atherton: *Aunt Dimity's Christmas,* Viking, $22.95. When a homeless stranger appears half-dead in the snow outside Lori Shepherd's cottage shortly before Christmas, the American-in-England puts aside traditional Yuletide concerns to investigate, with ghostly help via automatic writing from the late Aunt Dimity. Though the mystery plot is thinnish, the writing, characters, and atmosphere make this a charming and inspiring holiday story.

** Mel D. Ames: *Amazon: The Complete 13 Adventures of Detective-Lieutenant Cathy Carruthers,* Mosaic, $20 Canadian, $15 U.S. Carruthers, both physically and mentally a larger-than-life supersleuth, was a fixture of *Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine* in the '80s. Solidly in the pulp tradition of an earlier time, these wildly plotted and action-filled stories are a lot of fun if met halfway. Be warned, though, that Carruthers's clear superiority to all her male colleagues won't be enough to endear her to feminists, and the reader must be more amused than offended by over-the-top ethnic stereotypes.

** Agatha Christie: *The Unexpected Guest,* adapted as a novel by Charles Osborne; St. Martin's, $23.95. A motorist who has gone into a ditch in the wilds of Scotland enters a nearby house to find a murdered man and a woman with a smoking gun. Though Osborne's second faithful novelization of a Christie stage play continually reminds us a novel and a play are two different literary animals, it is a touch better than *Black Coffee,* probably because Christie was a more skilled playwright in 1958 than in 1930 and was wise to conclude she was theatrically better off without Hercule Poirot. Though *The Unexpected Guest* was a hit and Christie's other 1958 play, *Verdict,* a flop, only the latter was included in her 1978 collection *The Mousetrap and Other Plays.* Two of Christie's original stage mysteries remain unpublished in book form and thus logical candidates for novelization: *The Rule*

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of Three (1962), a trio of one-acts, and *Fiddlers Three* (1972).

Twenty stories by Dashiell Hammett, most previously collected in rare paperbacks edited by Ellery Queen, are gathered in hard covers for the first time in *Nightmare Town* (Knopf, $25), edited by Kirby McCauley, Martin H. Greenberg, and Ed Gorman, with a fine introduction by Hammett biographer William F. Nolan. Among the inclusions are all three Sam Spade short stories and "The First Thin Man," ten chapters written in 1930 as Hammett's first (and quite different) crack at the novel that would introduce Nick and Nora Charles.

For a last-minute stocking stuffer, try *Canine Christmas* (Ballantine, $5.99), edited by Jeffrey Marks and including 15 Christmas dog mysteries. A half-dozen sleuths also featured in novels appear here. Lillian M. Roberts's "The Reunion," about veterinarian detective Andi Pauling; Parnell Hall's "Clicker Training," about New York private eye Stanley Hastings; and Melissa Cleary's "Good Dog Wenceslas," about film teacher Jackie Walsh and retired police dog Jake, were especially entertaining. Others are Leslie O'Kane's "The Emerald Collar," about dog psychologist Allie Babcock (cute but far-fetched), Virginia Lanier's "Red Shirt and Black Jacket," about bloodhound trainer Jo Beth Sidden (the bloodhound lore is the main attraction), and Patricia Guiver's "Fowl Play," about pet detective Delilah Doolittle (pleasant but slight). The disappointment is that none of these detectives is featured in a fully clued detective story.

A nice holiday gift for the culinary-minded fan would be *A Taste of Murder* (Dell, $14.95), edited by Jo Grossman and Robert Weibezahl and featuring recipes of various cultures and nationalities from a broad array of writers. Though we haven't tried any of them out in the "Jury Box" test kitchens, the head chef noted some highlights: For a trip to Cholesterol City, Liza Cody's Great British Bacon Buttie; for humor, Nicholas Kilmer's offering of Fred Taylor's very basic Beans on Toast and Joe R. Lansdale's chili recipe with its comically vague quantities; for an exotic entree, T. Jefferson Parker's Triggerman's Rattlesnake (first, hunt your meat); for clever product placement, Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone Famous Peanut Butter and Pickle Sandwich (it got her a free case of Vlasic pickles) and Steven Womack's offering of Harry James Denton's Killer Jack Daniel's Marinade (we're not sure if it got him a case of Jack Daniel's); and for a thoughtful accompanying wine recommendation, Lev Raphael's Deep-Dish Lamb Pie. Though this is the best mystery cookbook ever, it raises a question of promotional ethics: Is it just too cute for words or a cynical joke on the public to advertise a famous author on the cover on the basis of his recipe for boiled water?

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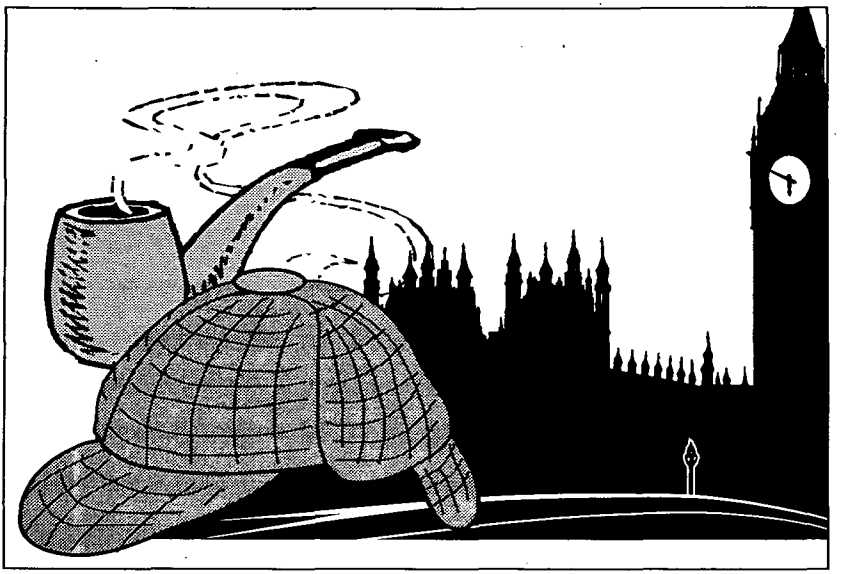

THE ADVENTURE OF THE CIPHER IN THE SAND

by Edward D. Hoch

It was a fine autumn morning in late September of '99 when Sherlock Holmes and I received an unexpected visitor at our Baker Street lodgings. Accustomed as Holmes was to welcoming paying clients, it was rare indeed for Inspector Lestrade to visit us.

"Is this official business?" Holmes asked, pausing in the act of filling his pipe to study the lean, ferretlike countenance of the Scotland Yard inspector.

"It is indeed, Mr. Holmes."

"I trust it has to do with a body discovered along the shore of the Thames River, near Wapping, within the last three hours."

Lestrade seemed taken aback by his words. "My God, Holmes! Has one of your Baker Street urchins brought you news of it already?"

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"I hardly need that," he replied with the superior gaze I'd seen so many times. "You know my methods, Watson. Explain to the inspector how I knew the location of the killing."

I studied him up and down for a moment. "Well, I can see moist sand dried to the knees of his trousers," I suggested with some uncertainty.

Holmes finished lighting his pipe. "Of course! Moist sand in the city on a sunny September morning most likely comes from the banks of the Thames at low tide. That particular grade of sand is mainly found near Wapping. A man of your rank, Inspector, would only have been called out for the most serious of crimes. The fact that you knelt in the moist sand tells me you were examining a body."

"You never fail to amaze me, Holmes," the inspector said, brushing the sand from his knees. "The body of a man was indeed found near Wapping this morning. Some sort of message was left in the sand near his body. It appears to be a cipher, and I heard of your success last year with the problem of the dancing men. I hope you can come with me to view this message before it is washed away by the rising tide."

Holmes glanced in my direction. "What say you, Watson? Is your calendar clear for the next few hours?"

"Certainly, Holmes."

Previously published in a 221-copy, limited-edition booklet, and available only to customers of Otto Penzler's Mysterious Bookshop in New York, "The Adventure of the Cipher in the Sand" is a Sherlock Holmes pastiche worthy of the immortal Doyle characters. *EQMM* reprints the piece as part of the homage we pay to the memory of the great Holmes toward the beginning of each new year. †

The area of Wapping near the Liverpool docks was made up mainly of four-story buildings with shops on the ground floors and lodgings above. Facing west, one could see the Tower of London looming in the distance. Holmes and I followed Lestrade down to the stretch of damp sand by the water's edge where a pair of bobbies stood guard. I could see that the tide had already turned.

"The body has been removed," Lestrade told us. "It was sighted just after dawn by the Metropolitan Special Constabulary—the river police—and officers were dispatched to the scene."

"What was the cause of death?" Holmes asked.

"Stabbed once in the back. The knife was still in the wound. The victim was dressed like a seaman, with black hair and a short beard. Perhaps he was off one of the merchant ships at the Liver-

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pool docks. He had no money or identification in his pockets, suggesting robbery as the motive. However, the killer missed this." He held out a white disk, apparently made of ivory, with the number 5 imprinted on it in gold ink.

Sherlock Holmes grunted, his attention taken by three rows of block letters in the damp sandy soil at our feet:

YVI YAH
TOMIT
WAHT YH

"It's a cipher of some sort," I agreed, "but hardly anything like the dancing men. Perhaps Roman numerals, mixed with other letters."

"The letters are much too regular for it to have been made by a person's finger," Holmes said thoughtfully, "certainly not by a dying man's finger. It looks more as if they were imprinted. Where was the body found, Inspector?"

"Right here by the message. There were some footprints, but by the time the body was discovered and the police arrived, I'm afraid the original tracks could not be determined with any degree of accuracy."

Holmes shook his head hopelessly but still went through the motions of squatting down and examining the nearest footprints with his magnifying glass. He asked the two bobbies to lift their feet and examined the bottoms of their shoes as well. "I can find very little," he admitted. "The area is too cluttered."

Holmes jotted down the apparent cipher in his notebook and we left the scene as the rising tide began to fill some of the letters with water. "Did you see anything I missed?" Lestrade asked.

"Many things, Inspector, but nothing that points directly to the killer. Please let me examine that disk you showed us earlier."

Lestrade handed over the ivory marker with the number 5 on it. "Could it be a coat check?" I suggested.

Holmes shook his head. "Coat checks usually have a hole in them. And they're not made of ivory. I would guess this is a roulette chip from a fashionable casino, in the amount of five pounds."

"That was my thinking exactly," the inspector said.

"The casinos for the affluent are to be found in the West End. Are there any places near here, in the East End, which might use such chips?"

Lestrade considered the question. "Certainly not in this area, with its wretchedly poor people."

"Still, there is a fine row of eighteenth-century houses to be seen in Wapping High Street. I could easily imagine one of those as an illegal gambling establishment."

"We have heard rumors," he admitted.

Holmes nodded. "I will look into the matter."

"But what of the cipher?"

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"All in good time, Inspector."

Holmes said very little about the case when we returned to our lodgings in Baker Street, but I noticed him more than once puzzling over the message in the sand that he'd copied into his notebook. After dinner, when I was giving some thought to retiring early, he suddenly roused himself from his favorite armchair and announced, "Come, Watson, it is time we visited Wapping High Street."

"Now, Holmes? It's after nine o'clock!"

"This is just the time when London's night life begins to awaken."

Holmes directed our hansom cab to a block on Wapping High Street, and when we arrived he pretended he'd forgotten the number we sought. "What is it you're looking for, gents?" the driver asked from above.

"The casino."

"Parkleigh's?"

"That's the one."

The cab moved down a few houses and stopped before a three-story brick home of eighteenth-century design where two gentlemen were just entering ahead of us. Holmes paid the man and said as we alighted, "Lestrade should check with the hansom drivers for his information."

Once inside the door of the establishment, Holmes and I passed through a red velvet drape into a passage where a porter awaited us. "Welcome to Parkleigh's," he said, and showed us into a large ballroom which must have occupied most of the ground floor. An attractive blond woman played a piano at one end and there was a bar at the other end, with small tables and chairs along the walls. About a dozen couples were dancing to waltz music, and I expressed my surprise at the presence of women. "They are hostesses provided by the establishment," Holmes explained.

We proceeded upstairs to the gambling room, which was much more crowded. Perhaps fifty young and middle-aged men were grouped around the gaming tables playing roulette and dice and *chemin-de-fer*. All were well dressed, some in formal evening attire. I saw at once that Holmes had been correct. The ivory disk in the dead man's pocket was indeed a roulette chip. In fact, the five-pound chip seemed to be the highest denomination in play. At the far side of the room was a glass-domed tape machine that supplied race results by means of a telegraph ticker. Apparently the establishment was open in the afternoons for wagering on horse races.

The murmur of conversation was low, broken only by an occasional shout or curse from an emotional player. Tobacco smoke hung heavy in the air, though there were no drinks served upstairs. We'd been observing the scene for some minutes when a short, thick-set man who might have been a former prize-fighter

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came over to introduce himself. "I'm Jerry Helmsphere, the manager here. Can I help you gentlemen with anything?"

Sherlock Holmes smiled. "I had thought that I might help you. I understand that you have had some criminal activity here of late."

The man seemed taken aback by his words. "Could you step into my office, please?" We followed him into a small office where Holmes introduced us. It was obvious at once that the man recognized the name. "Sherlock Holmes, the consulting detective?"

"The very same."

"How did you learn of the theft of our tape machine?"

"I may have a clue to its whereabouts," Holmes said, pointedly ignoring the question. "Would you care to hire me in an official capacity?"

The short man was hesitant. "How much are you asking?" Holmes mentioned a figure and the man sighed. "I am only the manager here. I don't possess that sort of money."

"But you cannot request help from the police, since your entire operation is illegal," Holmes remarked. "And you dare not report it to your owner."

"The owner resides in Paris. He is better left undisturbed." Helmsphere made a counteroffer. "That is as high as I can go."

"Very well," Holmes agreed. "Now tell me exactly what happened to your missing tape machine."

"You may have noticed one machine against the opposite wall as you entered. Its ticker reports the results from Epsom, Ascot, and the other tracks. We had two such machines to accommodate more of our patrons who wished to read the results before they are posted. One was stolen during the night. I need not tell you that the tape machines are expensive, and illegal possession of one could lead to all manner of chicanery."

I observed that beads of perspiration had collected on Jerry Helmsphere's upper lip as he spoke. Clearly the disappearance of the machine was a matter of grave importance to him. Holmes sensed it too, and asked, "What sort of chicanery?"

He wiped a hand across his lips. "Many of the smaller bookmaking establishments do not have tape machines like these. Whoever stole it could use it to place bets on winning horses before the official results reached those places. The other bookmakers might hold me responsible for their losses."

His meaning was all too clear. The man feared for his life unless he could recover the stolen machine. "How heavy is it?" Holmes inquired. "Could one man have carried it out alone?"

"Not easily. Two would be much safer."

"At about what time would the theft have taken place?"

"We close here at two A.M. I'm usually around until three checking the books and making certain the place is cleaned up. We open

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at one in the afternoon on race days, so it makes for long hours." He paused, then added, "The theft would have taken place between three A.M. and noon, when I discovered it."

"A man's body was found this morning down by the river. He was dressed as a seaman and had one of your roulette chips in his pocket. Do you remember anyone like that being in here last night?"

Helmsphere shook his head. "We generally attract a better clientele. A man in seaman's dress would not have been allowed upstairs. However, he might have remained downstairs to mingle with the girls. Let me ask Frances."

He sent someone downstairs to get her, and after a moment the blond piano player joined us. Her name was Frances Poole and she seemed to be in her late twenties. She eyed Holmes and me with some apprehension. My friend smiled, trying to put her at ease. "There is nothing to fear, Miss Poole. We are only inquiring about one of last evening's customers. This would be a man with black hair and a beard, dressed as a seaman."

She nodded at once. "He danced with some of the girls and then he wanted to go upstairs, but Tim told him he wasn't dressed for it."

"Tim?"

"That would be Tim Thaw, one of our croupiers. They often go downstairs on their breaks," the manager told us.

"Could I speak to him?"

"Frances, have someone relieve Tim and tell him to come in here."

She nodded and went off on her mission. Through the open door I saw her approach a sandy-haired young man at the roulette table. Presently he came in to join us, while someone else took his place at the table. "How can I help you, Mr. Helmsphere?" he asked.

"I have invited this gentleman here to investigate the theft of our tape machine."

Holmes shook Thaw's hand and said, "Miss Poole tells me a bearded seaman was downstairs last evening and spoke with you about coming up here for gambling."

"I informed him that proper attire was needed for the gaming room, and he remained downstairs with the ladies."

"Did he mention his name, or his ship?"

"His name was Drexel, I believe, off one of the Liverpool ships. I didn't see him again after my break ended."

"He left a bit later," Frances Poole confirmed.

"Alone?"

"I believe so."

We seemed to have learned all there was to learn, and as we left the office we walked out with young Thaw. "Have you worked here long?" I asked.

He shrugged. "A few months. I owned a country pub near Hen-

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ley but couldn't make a go of it. I think I was always meant to live in London. This is a nice place to start out."

Holmes and I watched him for a time at the roulette table, then went back downstairs. Frances Poole was at her piano. Some of the ladies had disappeared from the dance floor and I wondered aloud to Holmes where they might be. "Good old Watson," he said. "That needn't concern us. We have quite enough with the murder by the river and the stolen tape machine."

"Do you think the two are linked, Holmes?"

"Almost certainly. The thief needed help to carry the stolen machine out of here, and hired this seaman. They had a falling-out, no doubt over money, and the thief stabbed him."

"But if that's true, Holmes, what happened to the killer and the stolen machine? And what was the meaning of that cipher message?"

"I believe I know, but we must wait until morning."

It was quite unusual for Mrs. Hudson to interrupt our breakfast with news of an early morning visitor, but she did so the following day, announcing that Inspector Lestrade had come calling once more.

"Send him up, by all means!" Holmes exclaimed. "He may have news for us, Watson."

The inspector apologized for his early arrival. "I thought you'd want to know, Mr. Holmes, that the dead man has been identified. He was missing off the Irish freighter *Antrim,* and the captain identified him as a third mate named Sean Drexel."

"I suspected as much," Holmes said. "Watson and I visited Parkleigh's last evening and his name was mentioned. He was there shortly before his death."

"Parkleigh's!" Lestrade repeated. "How did you ever find such a place?"

"It matters not. Could the Metropolitan Special Constabulary supply us with a police boat this morning?"

"It might be arranged, but to what purpose?"

"Give me a boat and I will deliver the murderer before noon."

Within the hour we finished breakfast and Holmes donned the pea jacket and red scarf he'd worn before when we ventured onto the Thames. "Do you have your revolver, Watson?"

"You believe I'll need it?"

"Perhaps."

Lestrade insisted on coming with us in the launch, and we met it at Westminster Wharf. Its green running lights had been removed from the sides so it was not readily identifiable as a police boat, and we set off downriver toward Wapping. A morning mist still hung over the water, but the sun was gradually burning

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it off. We passed tugboats pulling lines of loaded barges, but Holmes paid no attention to the river traffic. He seemed alone with his thoughts until we had gone under Tower Bridge. Then he sprang instantly to life.

"Steer us toward the south shore," he instructed the officer at the wheel. There was another man tending the coal-fired steam engines below deck. As the launch moved closer to shore, Holmes scanned the damp soil with his binoculars. The tide was still low, though it was beginning to rise as it had on the previous morning.

"What are we looking for?" Lestrade asked. "And why here? The murder occurred on the opposite bank."

Without lowering the glasses from his eyes, Holmes began to speak. "The facts of the case seem clear enough. The casino chip in the victim's pocket led Watson and me to Parkleigh's in nearby Wapping. There we learned that a valuable ticker-tape machine, used for receiving race results, had been stolen during the early morning hours, after three o'clock. This is a relatively heavy machine, and since some sort of carrying case was necessary to protect the glass dome, the thief would have wanted someone to help transport it out of the casino. The seaman Sean Drexel was recruited and given a five-pound casino chip as a down payment."

"How can you possibly know that, Holmes?"

"Drexel was barred from the casino floor because of his seaman's attire. He could only have acquired that chip if someone on the ground floor gave it to him."

"Come now," Lestrade argued. "I can think of another explanation. A fellow seaman, having visited the casino, might have brought it back to their ship and given it to him."

But Holmes shook his head. "No, Inspector. If that were the case, the fellow seaman would surely have remarked upon the proper attire for admittance to Parkleigh's."

The police launch was moving closer to shore, and we were directly opposite the place on the north shore where the body was found. "Soon, now," Holmes said, almost to himself.

"You believe the killer came across the river to this area?" Lestrade asked. "Why not the other direction? Why not the north side?"

"You are full of questions today," my friend answered, a slight smile on his lips. "He obviously left the scene of the crime by boat. Working alone, he would have had to drag his heavy box back up to the street if a vehicle awaited him, and there were no drag marks. The use of a boat implies a destination across the river in an easterly direction. If he were going west it would have made more sense to hire a vehicle and go back over Tower Bridge. But there is no other bridge to the east of Tower. Rather than risk a long carriage ride and the driver's suspicions as to his cargo, he acquired a small

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boat, no doubt a rowboat, to carry himself and his loot across the river. His destination was a location in this area where the tape machine could be installed to deliver early race results."

Suddenly he gripped my shoulder. "Quick, Watson, look through these binoculars and tell me what you see!"

I did as he asked. "It seems to be a small warehouse of some sort, probably abandoned."

"No, no—on the sand leading up to it!"

"Drag marks above the tidal line," I confirmed. "They might be from a boat."

"No doubt. And something else besides."

As we drew nearer I could see that one of the warehouse doors stood open a few inches for ventilation. It seemed likely that our quarry was inside. Lestrade directed the officer at the wheel to dock the launch at a pier about a hundred feet downriver. As Holmes and I left the vessel, the inspector and the two-man crew were right behind.

When we neared our destination I drew my revolver. "You won't need that," Lestrade told me.

"The man is a murderer."

"It has yet to be proven."

Holmes flung open the warehouse door, revealing a figure bent over a tape machine identical to the one we had seen at Parkleigh's. "I must interrupt your work," Holmes said, like the voice of judgment. "The police are here to arrest you for murder, Mr. Tim Thaw."

When he saw the revolver in my hand, and the officers behind us, Thaw offered no resistance. Instead, he tried to argue his way out. "I know nothing about a murder."

As the officers took him into custody, Holmes went over to inspect a rowboat and a wooden packing case. The latter had obviously been nailed together by Thaw from scrap boards. "This was an investigation where I suspected I knew the killer's name even before I met him. Thaw told us he'd owned a pub near Henley, and that was the final clue I needed."

He showed us again the apparent cipher we'd found in the wet sand, only he'd rewritten it to move the first line to the bottom:

T O M I T
W A H T Y H
Y V I Y A H

"Do you see it now?" Holmes asked. "The letters were raised on the bottom of this homemade box made out of scrap lumber. In the damp sand their impression was printed backward, like a metal die. These pieces came from Thaw's old pub sign." He turned over the box so we could see the embossed bottom:

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HAY IVY
TIMOT
HY THAW

"Timothy Thaw, Hay & Ivy. You'll note the spacing device between his first and last names, and the ampersand between *Hay* and *Ivy.* Both are painted rather than embossed, so they did not leave their marks in the soil. He cut the sign apart, using the wood for the bottom of the box where it wouldn't be seen. By some curious coincidence, all of these letters are symmetrical, appearing the same forward and backward."

"Why didn't he notice the imprint on the sand?" Lestrade wanted to know.

"Because it was dark when Drexel was killed. Remember the river police spotted the body just after dawn."

"And Thaw rowed across here alone?"

"No great feat for a young man, especially one from Henley, where rowing is a popular sport, at least at Regatta time. But he had to drag the box up here, and I was counting on its having left marks above the tidal line."

Lestrade turned to confront their captive. "Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

The man curled back his lips. "He wanted more money. He made threats. I stabbed him. There's nothing more to say."

"You should have stayed in the pub business," Holmes said. ●

EQMM and The Baker Street Irregulars toast Sherlock Holmes!

Unlike Agatha Christie, who saw to it that her most famous detective, Hercule Poirot, was killed off permanently before her own death, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle left Sherlock Holmes alive and well—available for adventures in the work of future writers. The above story forms part of The Mysterious Sherlock Holmes, a series of short-story parodies and pastiches published one per month and drawing heavily on the work of early writers of Holmes parodies, with the occasional new pastiche such as Mr. Hoch's. (see blurb, p.43)

It is the undying popularity of the Doyle characters that makes possible the dozens of parodies and pastiches at both novel and book length that are published every year. In honor of Holmes and Watson, and in concert with the Baker Street Irregulars, the world's oldest Sherlockian organization, *EQMM* sets space aside each year, around the time of Holmes's birthday on January sixth, for at least one piece of fiction or art pertaining to Holmes and Watson. This year we've included not only Mr. Hoch's story but a poem by Dennis Upper (p.68) and a cover by artist Keith Richens. While we were planning this special issue, the Baker Street Irregulars were arranging their Twelfth Night dinner in honor of Holmes's 146th birthday. We hope you, our general readers, and they, our devoted Sherlockians, enjoy this birthday issue!

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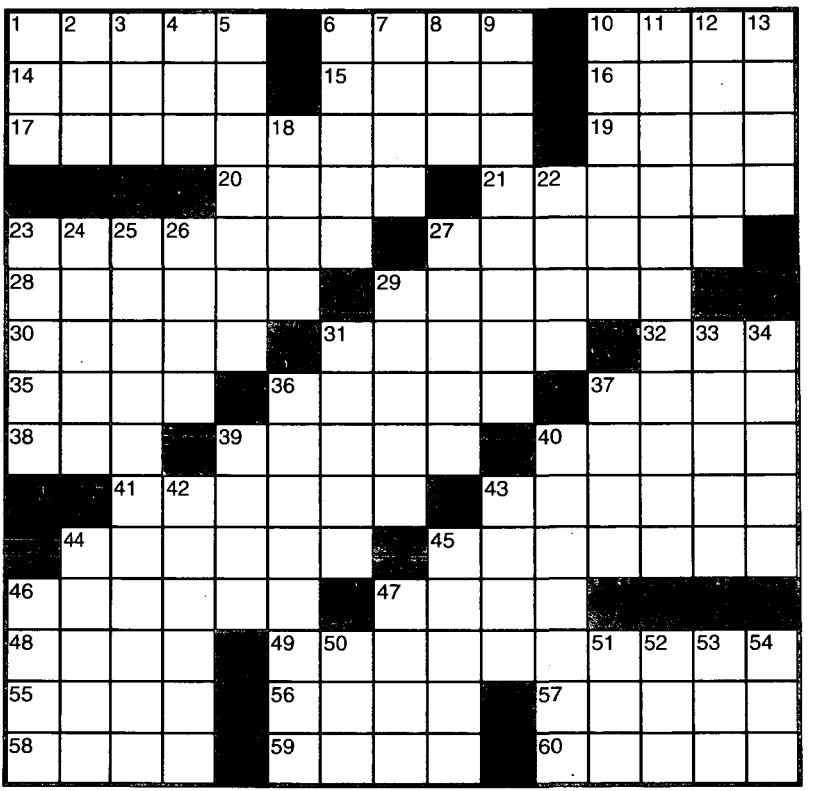
Hard As a Rock

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 142

ACROSS

1. Lindsey Davis's sleuth, Marcus Didius
6. Actor Guinness of *The Ladykillers*
10. Frosts
14. " . . . partridge in ___ tree"
15. Had his mother, among others, killed
16. ___ Furutani, author of *Death in Little Tokyo*
17. Part of 49 Across perhaps (Carol O'Connell)
19. Noble Italian family
20. Mmes. in Madrid

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21. Cicero, e.g.
23. Money in Spain
27. Potatoes au ___
28. Frees
29. Cowardly
30. *Street of Five* ___ by Elizabeth Peters
31. Sally S. Wright's ___ *and Predator*
32. Good letters for Simon Brett's hero Charles Paris
35. Teen complaint
36. The must-see in San Antonio
37. ___ *Rites,* Susan Conant
38. Sharyn McCrumb's ___ *Walks These Hills*
39. Antonym for dead
40. Semiconductor
41. Old Hollywood comedian Guy
43. Small European finch
44. Jockeys
45. Computer enthusiasts
46. Gold pieces for Steven Saylor's Gordianus
47. ___ Boyer, creator "Doc Adams" series
48. Norway's capital
49. Found in a cemetery (P. M. Carlson)
55. Magpie
56. Site of snags
57. Mechanic, at times
58. Towel word
59. Points
60. Lacks

DOWN

1. Roman divine law
2. Fitting
3. Author of "Carolus Deene" series, Bruce to his friends
4. Clink
5. Ancient matricide
6. ___ *Book,* Barbara Vine
7. Parts of tables
8. Before
9. Where James D. Doss's Charlie Moon finds perpetrators
10. Think
11. Wouldn't bronze be better? (G. M. Ford)
12. Music man John
13. Prophet
18. Altars in ancient Rome
22. Kind of review
23. Cougars
24. "And ___ walked with God," *Gen. 5:24*
25. David? (J. Robert Jones)
26. Berlin number
27. Dirt
29. Long for
31. Carries on steadily
33. Less refined
34. American playwright Clifford
36. Well known Secretary
37. Go down
39. Retired
40. Mystery writer John Dickson ___
42. ___ Delight, card game
43. Arsenic's old partner
44. TV's Ms. O'Donnell
45. Busy places
46. 2nd yr. student
47. Coarse file
50. Maigret's king
51. Bond
52. Miss or "Man River"
53. American composer Rorem
54. Hesitant words

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THE ONLY TRUE COMEDIAN

by Ian Rankin

I suppose, looking back, my school days were to blame. Or maybe it was my parents' genes, which had left me the smallest boy in my year. The popular boys all seemed to be the tough ones, the sporty ones, the ones who weren't shy, who were good-looking.

I didn't really fit the bill. So instead, I became the comedian. Of course, they weren't laughing *with* me—they were laughing *at* me. I knew it even then, as I told my jokes and made my silly faces and did my funny walks. They told me I was off my head, said I was potty. I didn't mind: At least they were talking to me. At least they were noticing me.

Which meant I was allowed to participate in their games, or at least watch from the periphery, which was my favoured spot anyway. Watching them, I was able to learn. I learned which kids and teachers I could make fun of. I'd go for the younger kids, even spottier and uglier than I was, or for one of the unlovely girls who stood by the playground railings, sad looks on their faces. Oh, I was ferocious with anyone who couldn't bite back. It was how I stayed part of the gang.

The other problem was, I wasn't stupid, but when I became a member of Black Alec's gang, I had to pretend to be less clever than I was. And this pretence could only be carried off if I started

Ian Rankin's Inspector Rebus novels (his best-known work) have been rocketing to the top of Scotland's bestseller lists over the past couple of years, and a new television series featuring the dogged investigator is shortly to be released in the U.K. Entitled *Rebus*, the series is expected to come to American TV soon too. For the latest U.S. release of a Rebus novel see *Dead Souls* (St. Martin's Press). †

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slipping in class, answering questions wrongly when I knew the right answers, letting my test marks drop. The Deputy Head had a word with me. I think she could see there was a problem, she just couldn't figure out what it was. My parents were summoned to the school for a discussion. *They* started to take notice of me, too, helping with homework and revision. Still, I refused to fulfill my potential. Sometimes I would slip up and answer some question which had stumped everyone else. At these times, the teacher would peer at me, wondering what was going on.

Eventually, I was taken to hospital for tests on my brain. They glued all these electrodes to my head. Three washings later, my hair still felt sticky, and the results had failed to throw up any incongruities. When the final exams came, I was in a quandary. We'd all have left school by the time the results were posted. So if I wanted to, I could do as well as I liked. But something made me stay in character; maybe it was the thought that though I was leaving school, the gang would still be there, hanging around their favoured street corner, yelling abuse at cars and pedestrians, running down to the park with a carrier-bag of beer. It was a community I understood, and my chosen rôle made me unique within it. I was "Joker" or "The Comedian." I wasn't expected to take part in the occasional massed battles with other gangs. I proved myself by telling jokes and stories, by deriding other gangs (especially with reference to their personal hygiene and sexual habits), and by improving my range of impressions.

Soon after leaving school, however, I found that a lot of the gang had drifted away. Even Black Alec—our leader and mentor—had gained employment as a car mechanic. The merry band had dwindled to a few losers for whom the daily stint at the street corner had become an unwelcome chore. I thought about resitting my exams, going on to college or university. But Black Alec was my next-door neighbour: How could I tell him my plans? He wouldn't have understood. He'd have asked me to do the walk again, and afterwards his laughter would have had me craving more. More laughter, more acceptance, more of his approval.

Anyway, things didn't work out for him as a mechanic. He became a bouncer instead, working at a discotheque in Kirkcaldy. He got into trouble, spent a couple of months in jail, and when he came out he told us he'd just paid a visit to the "University of Life." From now on, he said, nothing would be beyond him. He'd only be satisfied with "number one." At the time, I don't think we really knew what he was talking about, but we found out soon enough.

I went to work in a chicken factory. It wasn't a bad job. The production line was mostly staffed by women, and I kept them smiling. I'd sing a song, do a little dance, whatever it took to please

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them. They were all married, kept asking me when I'd find a girlfriend. They wore white overalls and green wellies, their hair tucked into white caps. Sometimes, when I met them outside the factory, I wouldn't recognise them. My first Christmas party was a revelation. They were wearing dresses and makeup, having a drink and a laugh. We'd taken over the back room of a pub in Glenrothes. No management, just workers. There was some entertainment. A couple of the women sang songs. One of the foremen got up and told some jokes.

"Get off!" the women yelled at him. "Our comedian's ten times better than you!" They meant me. I was cajoled, persuaded. I found myself up on the stage, microphone in hand. I cleared my throat, cleared it some more, the sound filling the room. Someone called out for me to get on with it, and then somebody else twigged that I was pretending to be the production supervisor: He was always clearing his throat before he gave you bad news. There was scattered applause and laughter.

"I'm sorry to have to inform you all," I said, "that Christmas has been cancelled this year. You lot might not be happy, but I've two thousand capons in the back who're over the moon."

Now everyone understood; they'd all clicked into my act. And it felt wonderful. The hair on my arms was standing up. It seemed I'd been up there a couple of minutes, but I was told afterwards I'd done a twenty-minute set. Women were kissing me, telling me I was the best.

"You should turn professional," one of them said.

And eventually, plucking up courage, that's just what I did.

I started out at pub talent nights, winning a couple of contests. The publican might then invite me back for a three- or four-week run. I kept up the factory job, but now I had a girlfriend, Emily, who'd sung "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" at one of the talent shows. I'd asked her about the song. She'd no idea what it was all about.

"Just got it from one of my mum's Joan Baez albums."

We had a laugh together. Emily had a day job, too, in a shoe shop. She came up with the idea of me going full-time pro. She said she'd support me till I got rich and famous. She said it wouldn't take long. Her argument was that with my job, I'd no time to write new material. She was right: I really needed new material. So she became my manager, finding me bookings, and I lay in bed writing jokes and stories.

It all went well for a while. Then we realised I was just treading water. It was still pubs and clubs.

"You need a portfolio," Emily said. "Something you can show to agents and the TV companies."

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"What I need are some decent gags," I replied.

The writing wasn't working. It was never how I'd worked. I was spontaneous, my material came from life. Now that I spent all day mooching around the house, there was nothing for me to write *about*. If the act was going to go anywhere, I needed to take a few risks. And that's what I did. I invested in a tape machine and other electronic stuff so I could use funny noises and sound effects in my act. Then I got measured for a sharp suit—blue and sparkly, with shirt to match. I looked ridiculous in it, but then that was the point, wasn't it?

I now looked the part. Problem was, none of it came cheap. Emily had asked where I got the money.

"Savings," I told her, lying through my teeth. Soon enough, I knew as I said it, I might not have any teeth left to lie through. Because I'd borrowed the money from Black Alec.

Black Alec had almost fulfilled his ambition of becoming "number one." He was now one of the most feared men on the east coast. He ran a string of clubs in Fife, owned two pubs in Edinburgh, and had so many fingers in so many other pies, it was a wonder he could pick his nose. He also ran protection, prostitutes, and pornography—or so the rumours said. I'd never worked in any of his clubs—he said they were "upmarket," "mostly music-oriented." He said I was low class.

But still he loaned me the money. And now, with the act flagging, it was time to start paying it off, beginning with the interest. I knew Emily was broke: The shoe shop had gone bust, and she was on Jobseekers. I knew *I* didn't have any money. And I knew it wouldn't matter to Black Alec that I'd once been his next-door neighbour and personal jester. Nothing mattered to him but repayment and violence against the person. There were those who said he preferred it when people couldn't pay up. That way, Black Alec got to play.

Eventually, I broke down and told Emily. I'd been fobbing Alec's men off as best I could. They'd repossessed the electronics, and soon it would be time for them to start taking possession of my limbs, lungs, and lights. So we did what we had to do: went on the run. Thing is, to keep running we needed money, and I only knew one way to make money—keep on with the act, which made it hard for us to stay ahead of the GBH brigade. We'd turn up in a town, and while I tried to hustle a gig, Emily would be checking departure times of buses and trains. I'd do my stint, grab the cash, and we'd make for the station. Up and down the east coast we ran, as far north as Montrose, and south to Eyemouth, finding that the travelling was using up most of the money I made. At this rate, there was no way I was going to be able to pay back Black Alec.

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"We'll go to London," Emily said. "That's where the agents and TV people are. One spot on *Des O'Connor* and you could pay Black Alec ten times over."

"How are we going to get there?"

"We'll hitch," she told me. "All we need is a bit of money for food."

Which meant one last show. There weren't many places left to try. Word was out that Black Alec wanted to see me. Worse still, the rumour was I was washed-up, that I stank.

But a pub on Rose Street in Edinburgh was under new management and looking to kick-start a comedy club. They said they'd give me a fifteen-minute spot. If they liked what they saw, there'd be a twenty in it for me.

Twenty quid: I'd earned more winning talent shows. But I said okay. Of course I said okay.

That night, when I took the stage in my blue sparkly suit, there were about two dozen punters in the place: a smattering at the tables, most of them chatting at the bar. The last thing they wanted was me up there, spoiling their conversation and meaning the jukebox was turned off.

But I kicked off anyway. Nobody was laughing. Emily was in the DJ's booth, supposedly keeping an eye on my mike level, so there was no feedback. Right then, I thought feedback had a better chance of getting a laugh.

And then Black Alec walked in. Someone had tipped him off, and here he came with three of his lads. They took a table right at the front, Alec not taking his eyes off me, a little smile on his face—it was the first smile I'd seen all night, but it didn't exactly cheer me up. A bottle of champagne arrived, and just the one glass. Alec toasted me as he drank. Suddenly, horribly, my mind went blank, not a single joke in my repertoire could I remember. There were slow handclaps from the bar and cries of "Get off!"

"Does your mum let you out looking like that?" I told the heckler. "Look at him, face like a bulldog chewing a wasp." The heckler's pals laughed at this, and I was on a roll. I knew only one thing: The minute they booed me off, I was in for a doing. I had to stay on that stage, and the only way to do that was to be funny.

And I *was* funny. Inspiration took hold, and the stories started pouring out. I had stories about working in a factory, about shoe shops and working-men's clubs, even stories about school days. They clapped and cheered. More punters were coming in, and no one was leaving. I'd been on stage about forty minutes, but the owner wasn't about to signal time-up. The only person in the place not laughing was Black Alec. Even his lads had sniggered at a couple of the routines, but Alec just sat there stony-faced, finishing his champagne.

Eventually, tiredness got the better of me. I could fall back on

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lame material or stop while the going was good. I'd have won an audience and be losing my mobility. Alec looked like he was getting impatient. I never liked to keep an old friend waiting.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said, "you've been a great audience, even old bulldog-features over there. This set was dedicated to the one thing I've always enjoyed until this evening, namely good health. Thank you and goodnight."

I came off to applause, whistles, cheers. I walked right over to Black Alec's table and sat down opposite him. The jukebox came back on. The owner brought me a whisky. So did a couple of punters, congratulating me on the best show they'd seen. The owner wanted to book me a regular slot, maybe hosting the club. And throughout, Alec didn't take his eyes off me.

"So," he said at last, "that was your routine?"

"That was it," I said. I couldn't see Emily. Maybe she'd spotted Alec and done a runner.

"It was good," he said. "Really good."

I looked at him. Was it possible . . . ?

"You can warm an audience up," he went on. "I could do with someone like you."

"You're going to take me to one of your clubs and roast me on a spit?" I guessed.

And he laughed, the way he'd laughed when we were kids. "I'm offering you work, Comedian. That way, I can keep an eye on you while you pay me what you owe me. How does that sound?"

"It sounds great," I said, unable to keep the relief out of my voice.

"The same set should do." And I nodded while my insides turned to rubber. The same set? The one I'd improvised? I couldn't remember it, couldn't recall a single blessed punchline. And then Emily was marching towards me, waving a cassette.

"What's that?" I asked.

"I taped you," she said, leaning down to kiss me. "Now you've got your portfolio."

"And my continuing good health," I said, kissing her back.

I used to think comedy came from wanting acceptance, wanting to be liked. Now I know differently. I know it's all down to fear. Fear, ladies and gentlemen, is the only true comedian in town. ◉

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HORACE AND HOMICIDE

by Terry Mullins

Most of the cases referred to Cheiro Bay by the New York police came to him late. They were cases which had not yielded to regular police methods but which had some connection with handwriting. When all else failed, the handwriting clue was sent to Bay. Such cases seldom posed a personal threat to him. But looking into the death of Kip Stein brought danger immediate and violent to Bay himself.

Stein was a junior at Columbia University who published *Stanzas of Sensuality* in December. It was reviewed in the *New York Times,* the reviewer saying, "This is a promising first book of poems. When the author has matured and broadened his scope, he could become a leading influence in the twenty-first century." Stein resented the review as faint praise. Someone else resented the fact that it was praise at all. Stein was killed less than a month later.

Lieutenant Hobbes laid a sheet of yellow paper on Bay's desk. "Stein got that back in March when he first started bragging about having his poems accepted," he said. "He kept it and placed it in the first copy of *Stanzas* that came off the press. Later he clipped the *Times* book review and placed it there, too. It's written in Latin."

"So I noticed."

"It looks like a woman's handwriting to me."

Bay shook his head. "Just because the writing is clear and rather pretty, don't jump to the conclusion that a woman wrote it. Some women scrawl illegibly and some men have beautiful script."

A Philadelphian who describes himself as a retired editor, Terry Mullins has been writing for *EQMM* since 1988. His series starring Cheiro Bay is the only one this editor has come across that regularly involves handwriting analysis in the solution of the crime—an interesting omission from the main body of crime fiction since handwriting analysis *is* employed in the solution of real crimes.

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Hobbes gave a reluctant smile and sat down, stretching his long legs out and slumping comfortably in the chair. "So what can you tell me?" he asked.

"You know I have to submit it to a lot of tests. But I can tell you this much right off. The writer is a careful person who hated Stein."

"Enough to kill him?"

"That's going too far, but the fact that such a meticulous person would write on cheap yellow ruled tablet paper shows a contempt for the person addressed."

"And how do you know it was a careful, meticulous person?"

"Every letter is deliberately formed. The periods and the dots over the *i* are all not just dots but perfect circles. Tell me, why do you attach such importance to this message?"

"Because it is the only thing in writing we have to go on. The person who wrote it switched to making phone calls, all in an epicene whisper. Toward the end there were threats."

"How was Stein killed?"

"He was giving a party in his own rooms. He had his personal beer stein, a large thing made in Bavaria. Five of his classmates, two men and three women, saw him open a bottle of imported beer and pour it into the stein. He drank over half of it at once and began to act funny. He drank another quarter and went out of his mind. He kept screaming, 'They're after me!' and his friends thought he was seeing snakes or pink elephants. Then he turned on his friends and said that they wanted to kill him. He opened a drawer, took out a pistol, and said, 'You'll never kill me,' and shot himself in the head. When the police arrived, he was dead."

"I suppose the beer was drugged."

"We examined everything. The beer left in the stein was heavily loaded with LSD, but there was none in the bottle from which it was poured and nothing in any of the other bottles or glasses. We figure that someone painted the inside of his stein with LSD. No one else was ever permitted to touch it. He called it Stein's stein. So the murderer was sure to get him and no one else."

"But LSD is an inefficient murder weapon."

"That's right. Whoever did it may not have wanted to kill him. It could just have produced a psychosis. But the odds are such a large quantity would have ruined him as a writer. He could have spent the rest of his life in a padded cell."

"Your handwriting experts have done their work?"

"Yes. This note was not written by any of those present at the party or any other of his close friends."

"Could it have been an accident or suicide?"

"Not likely. Stein drank a lot, but he never touched drugs of any sort."

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"Tell me about the telephone threats."

"We know a lot about them because Stein liked to talk about himself and anything that happened to him. The threats all warned him not to publish his poems. Only one warning came after his poems appeared in print. It said, 'It's too late now.'"

"Did any of them contain Latin?"

"No, but twice the voice referred to the note: 'You should have heeded my warning'—that sort of thing."

"He never reported this to the police?"

"No, he didn't take the threats seriously. He thought he could find out who it was for himself if the person kept calling. Besides, it gave him lots of reason to talk about himself. He repeated each conversation at length to his friends."

"Okay, I'll analyze the note and try to give you a description of the person who wrote it."

"Can you read what it says?"

"Oh yes. It is a quotation from Horace, but why in Latin? You'd expect an English translation. *Membranis intus positis. Delere licebit, quod non edideris; nescit vox missa reverti.* That's true enough. 'What you don't write, you don't regret; what you publish, you can't recall.' It's ironic that the writer didn't heed Horace's advice. As it is, he wrote this and we have writing which will give us some good clues to the murderer's identity, and proof of it if you catch the killer."

Bay spent the rest of the afternoon studying the note, getting a general impression of it and listing the more obvious characteristics. Darkness came, darkness of a sort. The sky was dark but light now surged up from below, from streets crowded with headlights of a million cars. Bay closed his office and headed home.

As he stepped out onto the sidewalk, he was aware of a furtive movement across the street, as if someone were watching him, someone who had been watching his building and waiting for him to come out. It was an unsubstantial impression of a gesture of menace hidden by the glare of passing cars and the restless anonymity of the metropolis. He walked home, looking back from time to time; but he saw nothing that might have been a repetition of the brief hint of evil.

The incident heightened his caution, however. He thought over his patterns of action, his habitual moves and the dangers to which they might expose him. He concluded that at home or in his office he would be fairly safe. Both places had doormen who monitored everyone going in and out. This made him wonder about Stein. Were there similar conditions where he lived? He asked Hobbes about it when the lieutenant came to his office the next day.

"You are on the right track," Hobbes said. "Stein lived in a two-

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room apartment in a building with no doorman and little security. He carried his keys in his jacket pocket. We figure that the killer was among a crowd at the handball court where Stein played. The killer could have hung a jacket beside Stein's, taken his keys, had duplicates made, and returned the keys within twenty minutes. There is a do-it-yourself key machine on campus."

"And with those keys, he could enter Stein's apartment any time it suited him."

"Right. Now tell me what you have found out from the handwriting."

Bay rubbed his chin, spread his sheets of analysis out before him, and said, "Most of this I could have told you yesterday, but I don't like offhand analysis. The extreme backhand slope of the writing, the careful formation, almost as if each letter were printed, the fact that *a* and *o* are open at the bottom, the fact that capital letters are very much larger than lower-case letters, and the heavy, even pressure all suggest a cautious, meticulous person, introverted to the point of being self-centered."

"That's not much to go on."

"There are other things confirmed by careful analysis. Look for a young person—late twenties perhaps, in college or doing graduate work, maybe a young instructor. I would suggest your asking local publishers if such a person has submitted poems for publication and had them rejected."

"Good point. The note does suggest envy, doesn't it?"

"Who knows that you are consulting me?"

"It was in the college newspaper. They got it from one of our handwriting experts. Why? Have you been threatened?"

Bay told him about the incident.

"Be careful," Hobbes advised.

"I intend to."

The second incident was more spectacular. Someone telephoned the newspapers that a bomb had been placed in the office of a Japanese import firm housed in the same building as Bay's laboratory. The entire building was evacuated while police searched for the bomb. They found nothing. There was, however, much confusion. Bay, standing and watching the other occupants of the building mill around outside, reflected that Stein's killer could learn much about the people in the building and how they functioned just by taking notes on the whole process.

"Do you think Stein's killer wanted to get you out in the open where he or she could get at you?" Hobbes asked.

"No. The killer is too cautious to strike in public. I think the killer was watching and hoping to learn something about the people in the building without personally appearing among them."

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"The killer may have been closer than you think. A big crowd was attracted to the scene and the head of the Japanese import firm said he lost his keys in all the confusion. That may not have been an accident."

"I don't like that at all," Bay admitted. "You know, it's one thing to deal, as I have in the past, with a limited number of suspects, knowing that one of them is a killer and not knowing which. That was bad enough. But this killer could be any one of thousands of people who pass me on the street every day. What have you found from the publishers?"

"There are a lot of publishers in New York City."

"There can't be that many who publish poetry."

"Well, there are a lot. I sent detectives around to the major firms. It's amazing how many books of poetry they get each month. They send them out to readers. Unfortunately, the readers don't always reply quickly, and even the best publishers can't always find the letters which came with the poems when they were submitted. The letters we can find are typewritten, but our experts compared signatures with the note written to Stein. So far, no luck. By the way, here's the copy of Stein's poems you wanted."

Bay thanked him and spent several minutes reading. Hobbes waited patiently. Bay finally looked up. "They aren't as good as the review led me to think they would be," he said. "They're more influenced by Byron, Shelley, and Swinburne than you'd expect from a young poet today. The rhyming of 'universe' with 'pierce' is pure Shelley—also 'die' with 'liberty.' He didn't handle meter very well, either, a fact which he apparently realized as he wrote mostly in free verse. From the title, I anticipated rather erotic images, but the sensuality is mostly in words instead of in feeling. Take this, *Body fair to body foul, Egypt's asp to Grecian owl.* Anne Sexton isn't going to get much competition from writing like that."

"I'll take your word on the literary criticism. We've looked through it for personal references someone might have found objectionable. We didn't find that he had lampooned anyone." Hobbes paused, in no hurry to leave. With a professional's instinct, he sensed that the focus for a solution to Stein's poisoning was in Bay's office. Bay's analyses of the note sent to Stein lay scattered on three long tables set against the wall. Bay himself sat behind a clean desk, like a general who has deployed his troops and waits for the enemy to strike.

The comparison was too apt. From out in the hallway a noise very much like the sound of battle erupted. Hobbes was closer and got to the door first. The hall was full of people and smoke. "Don't use the elevators!" he shouted.

People were clogging the stairwell in their effort to escape. Smoke was coming up the stairwell and long black ropes of smoke

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were curling in from under the elevator doors. It had not diffused and the smell varied from the sterile blandness of air conditioning to suffocating masses of acrid gas so thick that it seemed to pour into one's lungs.

"There's a fire exit at the end of the hall," Bay called out.

The crowd flowed away from the smoking stairwell to the back of the hall. No smoke appeared when the emergency door was opened, and everyone began fleeing down the back way.

Hobbes found a fire extinguisher in the hall, broke the glass, and carried it to the now empty stairwell. Dodging the rising rivers of smoke, he and Bay quickly reached the floor below and found the door open. Bay looked in and saw smoke flowing out of the Japanese import office. The extinguisher on that floor was untouched. Bay broke it out and followed Hobbes into the burning office. In a few minutes the fire was out.

Firefighters arrived, and for a second time that day the building was evacuated.

"First a bomb threat, now this!" Hobbes said. "Someone is working pretty fast."

"I locked my door when we left," Bay said, "and I've got my key secure. I think you'll find this whole thing was very carefully planned. I don't care for your killer—too methodical for comfort."

Just how methodical, Bay was to find out several hours later when Hobbes came into his office again and disclosed what the police and fire investigators had found out.

"The fire broke out suddenly in a clothes closet of the import firm," he said. "It seems clear that when the bomb threat got all the workers out of the building, the person who phoned in the threat not only swiped keys from one of the bosses but also slipped an incendiary device into the jacket of one of the clerks. It was no doubt easy to do. There was great confusion, with people pushing and shoving and bumping into each other. The killer took advantage of all that. When the device went off, a secretary opened the closet door, screamed, and bolted for the hall. Everyone else followed, leaving doors open all over the place. The fire had nothing to stop it and could have gutted the office and maybe the whole building."

"The killer didn't just take advantage of an opportunity, but created the conditions and came prepared to use them," Bay pointed out. "That incendiary device didn't just happen to be available. It was secured and brought to the scene of the bomb threat for the specific purpose of being planted on one of the people from the building. We are not dealing with an opportunist but with a schemer—a chess player who sets traps by seeing several moves ahead. As I have said before, I don't like it at all."

"I don't blame you, but our case against the killer will be all the stronger once we catch him—or her. Anyone could get LSD at one

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of the head shops near campus. But now we have a fire bomb. Once we get the person who wrote that note to Stein, we will find people who saw her in Stein's apartment building, who saw her making keys at the machine, saw her in the crowd today, sold her the ingredients for a fire bomb."

"And to all that you will be able to add the fact that she or he had poems rejected by a publisher shortly before Stein's were accepted. You'll have motive, opportunity, and method. Fine. But you don't have any of that until you know who the person is. And the longer you take, the less likely you are to find witnesses who remember who was in the crowd today or who was in Stein's apartment building or who was at the handball court where Stein was playing. Put some pressure on those publishers. Send a CPA to go through their files if necessary."

"Right! I'm on my way."

Bay sometimes ate at a Chock Full O' Nuts place near the campus. He decided to do so tomorrow. First, however, he took the note sent to Stein with him to a photo-duplicating specialist. "I want this reproduced on paper as much like the original as possible," he said.

The man took one look, nodded, and pulled a pad of paper from his desk. "Will this do?" he asked.

"Perfect," Bay replied.

In minutes he had his copy. He returned to his office, locked the original in a cabinet, and laid the copy out on his desk. He studied it again, made notes on the margin, put light pencil checks over the open *a* and *o* strokes, and drew a line indicating that the left margin was extremely wide. Then he folded the note as the original had been folded and scuffed it up a bit.

He put the copy in the outside pocket of his jacket and headed out to eat. He hung the jacket on a hanger with two inches of the yellow notepaper sticking out. He sat with his back to the jacket at a table where he could see people coming in and going out. He took his time eating. The note was still there when he finished. He put on the jacket, paid his bill, and walked slowly back to the office, pacing himself so that he had to wait in little clumps of people at each of the four traffic lights. Without seeming to, he studied his fellow pedestrians carefully. He would recognize any of them in a lineup. When he reached his office, the paper was gone. He smiled. Perhaps twenty persons had the opportunity to steal the note. A dozen of them were in the twenty to thirty-five age group. He had narrowed the number of suspects from thousands to a dozen.

"Whoever it was was good," he told Hobbes the next day. "I was anticipating that the paper would be stolen. I had a good idea of

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the technique that would be used. Yet I never noticed a thing."

"Are you sure she didn't slip you a fire bomb?" Hobbes asked half seriously.

Bay blinked. "No, I am not at all sure. I'd better go through my jacket carefully." He did and found not a fire bomb but a small packet of sugar. "I never pick up packets of sugar when I eat out," he said.

Hobbes was suddenly very concerned. "Watch how you handle it," he said. "Here, put it in this plastic bag. I want to take that to the lab for examination." He left immediately.

Within the hour he telephoned. "It was heroin, pure and uncut. It probably would have killed you if you'd sweetened your coffee with it."

"That's a bit inartistic," Bay replied. "A classicist would have used arsenic in the Livia tradition."

"One more thing," Hobbes added. "We have a list of twenty-three poets whose books of poems were rejected by local publishers in the three months before Stein's were accepted. All of them have 'artistic' signatures. Our handwriting experts say that three of them could have written the note. It beats me that they can't pin it on one of them for sure."

"Don't be hard on them. Signatures often differ from one's normal way of writing, the way a politician's public speech differs from the way he talks in private. Still, I'd like to see those signatures. Do you know anything about the persons who wrote them?"

"Two are students at Columbia—a young woman undergraduate and a male instructor. The third is a middle-aged male reporter on the *News*. That's all we know so far. We are trying to get longer samples of handwriting from each of them."

"When you do, I think you'll have your killer."

Hobbes brought the signatures over and reported that none of the three writers had been located. Bay examined the signatures and said, "This is the one you want. Sele Hunter."

"The instructor, not the woman? How can you tell? There aren't enough similarities to be sure."

"No, not to prove anything in court, but the signature identifies the writer as the author of the note. It's the only one where *e* is solid every time, looking like a fat *i* without a dot. The *l* is also just a fat line without any opening, indicating an aggressive but secretive person. I think you'll find that Hunter taught Stein. It is particularly galling when one of your students publishes before you do."

Hobbes's beeper sounded, followed by a ghostly voice which said, "There's a large man with a beard and dark glasses across the street. It's an obvious disguise. Shall we move in?"

"Yes, right away," Hobbes replied. "I'll come on down."

He rushed out, didn't bother with the elevator but took the stairs

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three at a time. Bay remained in his office and watched. From his window he could see the street below for half a block in each direction. He saw two men converge on a figure half hidden in a doorway across the street. Hobbes crossed the street and joined them. There was no fight. Hobbes spoke at length with the person, handcuffed him, and had his men take him away. He returned to Bay.

"You were right," he said. "It was Sele Hunter. He had a large packet of some sort of brown powder in his pocket, probably some sort of cyanide. He also had a schedule indicating that bottled water was to be delivered to this building today. Do you use bottled water?"

A shaken Bay nodded a grave assent. "I hope you searched him thoroughly. He may have had more than that one packet."

"We did, but what are you thinking?"

"He quoted Horace once. He might do it again: *For poets have a right to kill themselves if that they want."* ●

SHAGGY DOG

by Dennis Upper

"My God, Holmes, His Lordship's dead!"
Said Watson, from the flower bed.
(Sir William Archibald-St. Leeds
Was lying stiffly in the weeds.)
"His face is purple as a beet—
I wonder what he's had to eat.
It looks like poison, that's for sure,
Or some odd food that wasn't pure."

Holmes said, "I know just where to look:
We'll ask Sir William's favorite cook
What befell the dear old lord
And sent him to his last reward."
The cook, when asked, just scratched her chin.
"I cannot think what done him in
But I recall, whate'er it means,
His final meal was franks and beans."

"Aha!" said Holmes, "a mystery!
The finest puzzle that can be!
So, my dear Watson, was it murder?
Or just some over-ripe frankfurter?
The toxicology's not clear
But there's another novel here—
Please call this tale, though, when you write,
The Curious Case of the Dog in the Knight."

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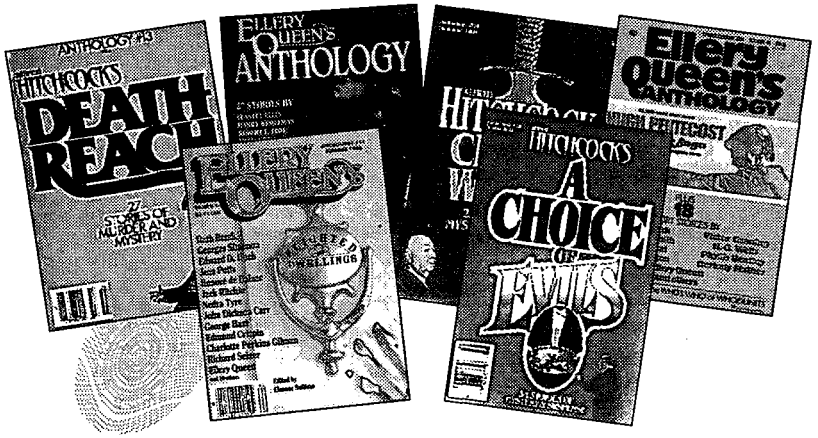

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Art by Mark Evans

COMING TO AN END

by Robert Barnard

This story begins with a confession, and this may strike you as odd. Most people will have seen those television police episodes which are tied up in the last five minutes by the villain's readiness to tell all, often for no discernible reason. So a confession at the beginning of a story may seem to you the wrong way round, but that is the way it was: A confession was the beginning of my interest in Mr. Parkway.

He was by no means the saddest of the inhabitants at the Haven Retirement Home, being at the worst in the very early stages of senile dementia. As I spoke to him on that day a very old woman gazed at us through the door of his room, clearly not knowing who we were, who she was, or where she was. Memento mori—one was getting that reminder every minute of the day at the Haven, or at any other of the many nursing homes in Eastcliff-on-sea. I am one of the doctors on daily call at the Haven, and it is an excellent establishment—friendly, caring, meticulous in meeting individual needs. It is also grim. Not in decor, or in the demeanour of its staff, but grim because grimness goes with the territory: All the inmates

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were in the last stages before the ultimate grimness—the Reaper.

"Poor old soul," said Mr. Parkway, as the woman with the blank, meaningless gaze wandered off back into the corridor.

"Mrs. Holland," I said, but without reproof in my voice.

"She's right out of it, isn't she? I had quite a sensible conversation with her three months ago, when she came in. Sometimes it goes very fast. Coming here hurries it up with some people. Retirement Home, they call it—retirement from life, that's what happens to people here. . . . I suppose we're all out of it, really."

"I write only to entertain," says Robert Barnard in *St. James Guide to Crime and Mystery Writers*. And indeed, the author's novels and short stories are not only examples of clever mystery plotting, they are usually full of sharp, observant humor. What the author neglects to mention is that he will occasionally set down a tale with very serious undertones. His new story for *EQMM* is one such.

"Not so long as you get some enjoyment out of life," I said cheerfully. I feel they pay me to be cheerful. "A good meal, the sun through the window, a bunch of flowers."

"Yah!" said Mr. Parkway derisively. "You wouldn't call that living if it was all you were capable of." His tone told me he thought I was treating him like a fool.

"Perhaps not, but different ages have different enjoyments."

"Maybe. Having enjoyments doesn't mean you're not out of things, you know. If I went and told the police I'd murdered someone years ago they wouldn't even bother to investigate. They'd say I was senile. What they'd mean by that is that I'm old, I'll soon be dead, and it's not worth wasting man-hours taking the confession seriously. That's all they think of these days—cost-effectiveness!"

He could have been a retired policeman. On the other hand, he could have been a retired criminal, regretting the days of long ago—eternal duels between determined cop and a determined villain, himself. I knew nothing about Mr. Parkway beyond the fact that his accent suggested to me that he came from my part of London, Peckham.

"Well, well," I said, winding up my examination of his wizened form. "We'll never know now, will we?"

He nodded, trying to twist his slack mouth.

"I shouldn't think so. I wouldn't risk confessing to the police—though I might risk confessing to you." A spark came into the eyes. "Because I did, you know."

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"Did what?" I asked, pulling the bedclothes back over him.

"Murder someone, years ago."

I smiled noncommittally, no doubt confirming him in all his suspicions that he was now, as an old man, a dead letter, a spent force, one who was no longer judged as operating within the usual rules for human conduct.

I pondered his words more seriously, though, over the weekend that lay ahead, which was mine to have off, the alternate doctor being on call. I like, as a doctor, examining cause and effect—not just treating a blocked sinus or swollen leg but trying to find out how they came about, and treating the cause as well as the symptom. I suppose I might have made a policeman, though they are hot on symptoms but weak on causes. Certainly I had always been fascinated by murder: the Peckham Strangler, the Bilton Street Poisoner, and Doctor Death had been familiar figures in local folklore in my childhood, and had haunted my dreams.

Mr. Parkway had never struck me as skittish or playful. Nor, come to that, had his last words been said in a humorous or testing way. Definitely serious, with a direct glance from his eyes to mine. That said nothing, really. A call for attention, probably. Not at all unusual in old people. Almost the rule, in fact, before they sank into a state where attention or disregard were both immaterial to them. Those were my first thoughts, but somehow I was unwilling to let the matter drop.

I had no particular reason to examine Mr. Parkway when I went back to the Haven on Monday morning, but I did notice him, watch him. He was up and dressed after a period of being "poorly," in the accepted language of the staff at the home. He was not poorly any longer. He walked confidently to the bathroom down the corridor, one fist clenched hard, the other arm swinging. I saw the same confidence when I saw him striding around the garden later in the day. He saw me looking through the window of the Activities Room and raised his hand to me. I wondered whether he expected me to drop in on him.

I hadn't worked out any subtle way of bringing up the supposed murder if I did drop in, but as it turned out I did not need one. I was passing in the corridor when he called me in. I put my head round the door, and he beckoned me over to his armchair.

"Did I tell you something, last time you were here?" The eyes told me he genuinely didn't quite remember.

"Er, you referred to something," I said.

"Thought I did. Memory's not what it was, you know. Have you thought about it?"

I declined to prevaricate. Mr. Parkway was touchy on the subject of condescension.

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"Your supposed murder? Yes, I have. I think it's a ploy to gain attention."

He cackled with laughter.

"You see? You're the same as the police. You'll do anything except take it seriously. If you took it seriously you'd have to *do* something about it. And you can't think what on earth you ought to do, or *could* do."

There was an element of truth in that, though he didn't realize that his confession had in fact intrigued me.

"You're forgetting that I know about ageing," I said slightly defensively. "I know that old people get more wrapped up in themselves, anxious about their own comfort and convenience, but also eager for attention."

"So that's the fruit of your attendance at places like this, is it?" he asked cynically.

"Pretty much so, yes."

"Then you're still a young man with an awful lot to learn."

"All right, then: Who was it you murdered?"

His reply was prompt.

"My best friend Billy Frampton's wife Maureen."

"Ah." That seemed a highly inadequate response, but it is not every day you hear such an admission, or rather claim. "And why did you do that? Did he ask you to?"

His expression was scornful.

"Don't talk rot! You don't commit murder *for* someone—not unless you're a professional hit man, and I certainly wasn't that. I did it for myself."

"Because you wanted to kill your best friend's wife?"

"That's right."

"And why should you want to do that?"

"She was no good. . . . No good for him, but that wasn't it. . . . No good for me and Dorothy. . . . It was a very complicated situation. . . . I don't really remember. . . ."

I looked at him hard. Was he shamming, or was he really losing his grasp on the conversation? That happened often enough with old people. So I was still no further advanced towards a decision as to whether he was teasing me or telling me some portion of the truth.

"That was in London, was it?" I asked, seeing an eyelid flicker.

"Yes. When I lived in London. . . . Before . . ."

"In Peckham?" But he looked at me quite uncomprehendingly and then shut his eyes again.

And so, perforce, the conversation ended, though whether by deliberate intention on his part, by play-acting, or by the familiar failure of concentration in the old I, for all my confident pronouncements on the ageing process, could not tell.

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It was time, I thought, to visit my Aunt Bessie in Peckham. My aunt had been my daytime and after-school minder after my mother was widowed and had to go out to work. Visiting Aunt Bessie was no piety: She was a second mother to me, and the last relative I had. As a preparation I dropped over one late afternoon to Colchester Library, found the London telephone directories, and established there were no Framptons in the Peckham area. First shot wild. But then, in London people were moving from district to district all the time. And the likelihood was both Framptons would by now be dead, whether by natural or other causes.

My Aunt Bessie, when I brought the subject up over a high tea such as she had always cooked for me when I got home from school, wrinkled up her old face.

"Frampton? Certainly not anyone I've *known*. But then we don't know people in London just because they happen to live nearby. But the name does have a familiar ring to it."

"Billy Frampton, that was the name."

"Yes." She pondered. "You know, something in me says sportsman, something like that. But that's not at all in my line, as you know, and *what* sport I couldn't for the life of me say."

So that was as far as she could help me. And yet the word sportsman did ring a vague bell in my mind, as if old people still sometimes talked of him in my childhood.

It proved easier, at the Peckham Library, to get access to old telephone directories than to electoral rolls, and I started, remembering I was dealing with an old man and his friend of long ago, twenty-five years before. This time the shot went home at once: Frampton, W., 24 Wilsden Crescent. I tried Parkway, but without success. I came forward five years and Frampton, W., was still there, but again no Parkway. Ten years and the Frampton was now M. Billy, presumably, had gone to confront the Great Umpire in the sky—possibly dying youngish, like so many athletes. The M did not prove that his house had been inherited by his widow, or that Mr. Parkway was lying. It could have been his son—Michael, say, or Maurice.

Time being limited, I returned the old directories and took out my A to Z of London. Wilsden Crescent was no more than ten minutes' walk away from the library. When I got there, I felt at home at once. Though a long way from the street where I grew up, houses could have been substituted one for another and very few people would have noticed the difference. They were all semi-detacheds from the mid thirties—neither pretentious ones nor mean ones. Avoiding both ostentation and penny-pinching, these houses and the houses in my old street proclaimed themselves proudly as middle-of-the-road ones. In Wilsden Crescent some of the gardens had rosebushes that were past their best, others

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lavateras that had got out of hand. Some had peeling paint on the doors and window frames, others were bright and show-off as young cockatoos.

The woman in her twenties who opened the door of number 24 was far from bright—dressed in the straw colour that was last year's shade of the moment and strapping a child in a pushchair to take it to the shops or to the minder's.

"Frampton? Living here? Could be—I wouldn't know. But it wasn't the last lot, nor the ones before them. We've had mail for them. We bought it from some people called Smithson. They'd only been here five years. Bought it for a bomb, then got trapped in negative equity, and we got it cheap—well, not *cheap*. Nothing's cheap in London, is it?"

"I suppose not. The Framptons were here twenty, twenty-five years ago."

"Before my time—with a vengeance! I wasn't born twenty-five years ago. That's ancient history so far as I'm concerned. Now, if you don't mind—"

"Is there anyone around here who might remember?"

"Don't know anyone around here. Try Mr. Patel, the newsagent, round in Grafton Way. He's been here for yonks."

But yonks in Mr. Patel's case meant ten years, and he had no memories of the Framptons.

"Not my time, mate. But I 'ave 'eard some old-timers talkin' about Billy."

"Really?"

"Used to be some kind of footballer. Local, y'know, but a bit of a celebrity in Peckham. And a bit of a lad in his time, or so I'd guess."

"Is there anyone around here who would remember him?"

"A few, I suppose." Mr. Patel took fifty pence for a Mars bar from a child as he pondered. "You could try Ben Whittall. He sometimes mentions him. Goes on about the old days. You'll find him in the Bull and Bottle. He drops in for his *Mail* on the way there, and he was in not ten minutes ago."

Ben Whittall I identified by guesswork in the public bar of the Bull and Bottle, and had my guess confirmed by the barman. He was sitting in a corner at work on the crossword in his folded-over newspaper. A stringy, bleary-eyed old man, whiling away a long lunchtime over half-pints and a packet of crisps. Time, I concluded, hung heavy. Time's heaviness was the old person's burden.

"Billy Frampton?" he said, looking up at me with gratitude and calculation. "That's going back a bit. Yes, I'll have another half, thank you very much. . . . Oh aye, I remember Billy. I'm not from round here, not originally, and I've always been a Chelsea sup-

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porter. But if Chelsea wasn't playing at home—I'm talking about the days when ordinary folks could afford to go to football matches—then I normally went to watch Peckham Wanderers. Very entertaining they were, for a little local team. Billy could be a sight to see on a good day, which might be when he didn't have a hangover or hadn't been overdoing his other main interest. I remember one goal he scored against Aylesbury as if it were yesterday. He was way back down his own end, but he got the ball from one of the defenders, and he dribbled down the centre, past—"

And so it went on, probably like no goal that ever was scored in football, let alone seen as if it were yesterday. Old people's memories always gain the garish hues of old-fashioned Technicolor. I waited patiently. I was used to doing that at Eastcliff.

"What about off the field?"

"Oh, I never knew him, not personally. Mind you, there were rumours . . . talk."

"What kind of talk?"

"Girls, o'course. He was one for the ladies, and there were girls who were pointed at in the street, children too. Didn't do his reputation any harm, even in those days. People chuckled. They say his wife tamed him."

"Do you know anything about her?" I asked. He shook his head.

"Maureen Somebody-or-other. Good-looking woman in a brassy sort of way. Used to come to matches towards the end of his playing time. By then he'd be thirty-odd."

"Past his sell-by date?"

"Well, past his prime. He needed to discipline himself if he was to stay in the team—no going out on the razzle before matches, that kind of thing. The word around the terraces was that she kept him on a pretty tight leash. He was in his late thirties before he packed it in entirely."

"Have you heard the name Parkway?"

He wrinkled his brow, then shook his head.

"Don't think so. Doesn't mean a thing to me."

"Leonard Parkway?"

"Not a thing. Wasn't in the team, that I will vouch for."

"I suppose you don't know anyone who knew the Framptons—personally, I mean."

"Might do," he said, with either a genuine or a cunningly assumed uncertainty. "I mean, might have done in the past. . . . Trouble is, I wouldn't know if they're alive or dead, would I? Mostly, these days, I find they're dead."

I took out a five-pound note from my wallet, and my card, and laid them on the table in front of him.

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"I'd appreciate it if you'd ask around, maybe ring around. I'd like to talk to someone who knew them."

His eyes gleamed. It wasn't just the money, I think, but the prospect of doing something interesting.

"I'll do my best. Will there be another in it for me if I find someone?"

"There will. Just drop the name in the post to me."

The information so far was meagre, providing no sort of clue as to why Mr. Parkway should want to kill his best friend's wife, but as I travelled back to Eastcliff on a grubby old train, it did seem to me that I'd at least got a lever which might be used to extract more information. The fact that Billy Frampton had been, in a minor way, a local celebrity was in itself a help.

"You know," I said the next day, as I took Len Parkway's blood pressure, "I think that name Billy Frampton rings a bell with me."

"Oh?" he said.

"Wasn't he a footballer or something?"

He shot me a bleary yet intelligent glance.

"You're from Peckham, aren't you?" I nodded. "I *knew* we had something in common! I took to you at once, and I don't to most people. Where are you from, then?"

"Jubilee Walk."

"Oh, that's ages away. Same sort of street, though."

"To what? Wilsden Crescent?"

He was too interested in the coincidence to ask why I should mention that particular street.

"No, round the corner. Grafton Way. It was Billy and Maureen lived in Wilsden Crescent. Well, well—a Peckham lad. Where did you go to school, then?"

And though I tried to bring the subject round again to the Framptons and his connection with them, I failed, and he was launched into Peckham in the old days and in my more recent ones, and nothing could divert the stream.

But I didn't, oddly enough, get the idea that he was playing with me. What he was doing I failed to fathom at the time, but eventually I guessed that he was willing to talk about the Framptons and his relationship with them only on his own terms and in his own time, and he needed warning to get his thoughts in order—to remember events either as they were, or as his old mind had reordered them.

Which made me confident that this was not the end of the matter.

It was later in the same week, when I had been called to prescribe a sleeping tablet late at night for him, that Mr. Parkway said: "You never saw Billy *play*, of course."

"No, of course not," I said hopefully.

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And he launched into an account of a memorable goal which was not the same goal as Ben Whittall had had lodged in his mind, but could have been for all the interest it held for me. I waited until it ended. I had become good at waiting at the Haven.

"Would I be right in saying he was a player with a lot of flair but not much discipline?" I hazarded as the account drew to its close. Mr. Parkway chuckled.

"Pretty much so. A sort of minor league Georgie Best."

"A bit undisciplined off the field as well as on, then?" I suggested.

"More than a bit. He had his first little accident with a girl when he was still at school. I know all about that because I was his best mate at the Alderman Trotwood High School."

"Oh, the good old Alderman Trot," I said. "So you weren't in the team with him?"

"Good Lord, no. I'd no talent at all in that direction, or any sport. We were just friends. Drinking mates now and again, though I was never one for binges like he went in for periodically."

"People said his wife tamed him."

"Oh, people say lots of things," Len Parkway said dismissively, "people who don't know the first thing about what they're spouting on about. She had him hooked, that was for sure. After all those women, Billy was looking for one woman who had everything, that he could settle down with. Maureen seemed to him to have everything. Maybe she did—and then a lot more."

"In what way?"

He thought, as if wondering whether to say more.

"All right, give those talkers their due: Billy was looking for someone to tame him, and she did it. But what was there left for her after that? A passionate woman who had always craved excitement, living with a tamed man. It wasn't likely she'd be content with that sort of life, was it? Maureen needed sensation like a tabloid newspaper needs it."

"So how did she get it?"

There was a pause.

"By getting herself murdered."

He said it with a sort of bleak relish, then turned over in his bed and feigned sleep.

There was only one occasion more when he consented to talk to me further on the subject of Maureen Frampton. It was late summer, and he was carrying a cup of coffee from the little do-it-yourself canteen out on to the lawn. "Get yourself one and join me," he said, so I did. We sat on either side of one of the little wrought-iron garden tables that were always put out for the old people on fine warm days. He started talking about her at once, and I had a strong sense right from the start that a censored, or a

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very personal or partial version of the truth was what was being presented to me.

"She couldn't keep her hands to herself, you know," he said, as I stirred my coffee and looked at him closely. "Once she'd got Billy under her thumb she had to get her excitements elsewhere. And my word she was an exciting woman! Like a Gypsy she was—Carmen to the life! Not that she had any Gypsy blood in her, nor anything else other than South London. It was all done with makeup—dark skin colouring, lots of mascara, a great red gash for the lips. That was the 'fifties: She was practically announcing to the men of the area she was ready for anything."

"Including you?" I asked.

He sighed, but didn't answer directly.

"She taunted him with her lovers. Billy never told me that, but she told me, and I believed her. When they met, Billy was the local star, the licensed playboy. By the time they'd been married five years, she was the centre of attention and he was Samson shorn of his hair and chained to a pillar. . . . She wanted me, yes. But she didn't want me for myself, not on your life. I was no catch. She wanted me because I was Billy's best friend."

I didn't ask whether she'd got him. He'd tell me that if he wanted to, or not if he didn't, and whether he would be telling me the truth if he did was more than I could divine.

"She drove me mad, I tell you straight. No other way of putting it. But when push came to shove, I couldn't bear to go with Billy's wife, and I couldn't bear to be her prize scalp, the best friend she would taunt him with, the lover that would hurt him most cruelly. . . . Maybe she did that anyway. Truth meant nothing to her."

"Couldn't you just keep away from her?"

"Not when I was home in Peckham. I was a commercial traveller, see, but with a set routine. When I was home, Billy would know it, and he and Maureen would expect to go about with Len and Dorothy. Anything else, and Billy would have smelt a rat. . . . Anyway, after a time, mad at not getting me in her grasp, Maureen tried a new tack. Said Billy and Dorothy were having it off while I was travelling the country. Said she'd smelt Dorothy's perfume on the pillowslip in their bedroom. I said a hundred women had bought the same perfume at Boots. Said she'd seen Billy going into my house the previous Thursday. Dorothy had told me he'd been round to borrow an electric saw that same evening—we rang each other every night without fail. Finally she produced a pair of knickers—said she'd found them hidden under the mattress." I waited. "Oh, they were Dorothy's all right. But how could I know how she'd got hold of them?"

I said nothing. He would tell me what he wanted to tell me.

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"She made my life so sordid," he burst out. "So soiled. Even the sight of her dirtied me, brought the thoughts and filthy suspicions back. I thought I would never be clean again, never whole again, unless I removed her from the face of the earth. We could never be as we were, Billy, Dorothy, and I, but we could be human beings again, instead of her degraded puppets."

He stood up to go in. I quickly asked: "How did you do it?"

He answered without hesitation.

"Hit and run. I followed her in the car one night to the home of one of her lovers, then I waited for her to come out. I always remember the bang, and all her bloody bracelets jangling as she was thrown across the bonnet and then onto the pavement. I drove away fast, and there's never a day's work I've done since that feels like a better one than that night's work I did on Maureen. Now you know, son."

And he went in, his walk firm but somehow frail. Perhaps, I thought. Perhaps I know, but it is only the bare outlines. Someone—not Len Parkway—is needed to paint in those outlines, give the faces and the bodies flesh and features and character. The key to understanding is in the detail.

It was a week or two later that I got a note from Ben Whittall. It was short and to-the-point.

"It hasnt been easy finding anyone," it said, "But Ive heard theres a woman in a nursing home in Clapton, thats your neck of the woods is'nt it? Funny thing is, she's his daughter so they say, Billys that is, but grown up by the time he married Maureen. The names Veronica Cardwell. The home is called Bidawile excuse spelling. Waiting to hear from you. Ben Whittall"

I put a five-pound note in an envelope and scrawled a note of thanks, though I suspected he would hardly bother to read it.

I didn't know the Bideawhile Rest Home, but there was no reason why I should: Clapton has been awash with such homes since the collapse of the British seaside holiday trade and the punitive tax on hotels levelled in the poll tax. The telephone response was brisk, and I was assured after a decent interval for consultation that Miss Cardwell would be delighted to see me on whatever errand and at whatever time suited me.

I had been expecting from its name a place suburban and without pretensions, but in fact it was seaside Gothic with turrets and a glorious view out to the North Sea. A no-nonsense young woman directed me down long corridors, and as I paced them my heart sank. The place itself looked well run enough, but the patients all seemed at the hopeless end of the ageing spectrum. Old women in nightgowns and cardigans wandered out of the rooms, their eyes fixed on vacancy, their limbs carrying them aimlessly and uncertainly. In the communal rooms several sat around staring at tele-

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vision or at nothing, with no sound from them but the occasional mumble. Staff bustled around—helping to feed, helping to clean, helping to stay alive. It was the Ancient Mariner's Nightmare Life-in-Death.

I was unprepared for what I was to find in Veronica Cardwell's room. A spry, well-formed woman, hair permed and tactfully dyed, still an attractive woman, younger than was usually to be found in such nursing homes, and with a sharp eye. My surprise must have showed.

"Did you expect to see a zombie?" she asked shrewdly, after the introductions.

"I was worried," I admitted, "seeing most of the people here."

She nodded.

"There's a few of us who've still got some of our wits. When I first came here I applied to go elsewhere, but . . ." She shrugged. "I think I've been forgotten. And sometimes I can be of use here."

"Would you be interested in a place in a more suitable home?"

She looked uncertain for a moment, and then a spark came into her eye and she nodded. We spoke for a bit about where she'd like to be, the sort of institution she'd feel at home in, and the nature of the leg and internal injuries she had got in a traffic accident two years before which made her incapable of looking after herself.

"But you didn't come here like a fairy godfather to spirit me off to a better place, did you?" she said eventually. "You came because you wanted something."

"You're right. I wanted to talk about your father."

Her brisk, shrewd manner did not alter.

"Now, I guess that won't be Walter Cardwell, who gave me his name. Poor Dad was an older man with a taste for young girls, and he accepted me as the price he had to pay for getting one. He wasn't a bad man, but he wasn't an interesting one either. So I suppose you're meaning Billy Frampton."

"That's right."

"Now then, I don't suppose you're featuring him in a colour supplement piece on the hundred greatest footballers of all time, and in any case you're a doctor not a journalist. So what's your interest? I can hear you're from Peckham, or from not too far away."

"That's right. And I've a patient at the home I'm attached to in Eastcliff from the same area. It's him who brought up your father's name, and it's him who's led me to take up a bit of amateur sleuthing. I remember your father's name—very dimly, I must admit—from when I was growing up, and what my patient has said has intrigued me—could we say no more about that for the moment? Anyway, the upshot is, I'd like to know about your

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father—whatever you can tell me, in fact. Particularly about his marriage."

"The dreadful Maureen?" Veronica Cardwell's face twisted in surprise and distaste. "Don't expect a fair and dispassionate account of her from me. She'd have been much happier if Billy and I had had no contact at all."

"Did you always know he was your father?"

"Oh no. Some kind person, another child, told me the local rumours when I was twelve. When my mother had me, she and Billy were both sixteen, so he didn't seem too old to me, and he was still a top local footballer who people talked about—worshipped, in the case of some of the boys at school. I thought about it for a bit, found out where he lived, then one day after school I went round and banged on his door. That was it. We gelled. I used to go round from then on whenever I felt like it, and he spoilt me rotten. We were quite clever about it, though: My mother never knew that we'd got together till I was almost grown up."

"Was he married then?"

"Not when I first went round. That came later."

"Did you meet his friends?"

"Not usually. I'd go round during the day. Len and Dorothy were his big mates, but I never did more than pass them on the step. . . . It's them, isn't it—him?"

She'd seen a flicker cross my eyes. I nodded.

"So did his marriage to Maureen change things?" I asked.

"Completely. It wasn't marriage at first. She had to get rid of a husband before they could actually smile on the Registry Office steps for the photographer from the *Peckham Chronicle*. But she made it clear from the beginning that I wasn't part of her plans and that my every visit was a trial and an intrusion."

"Why?"

"Does it need explaining? New wives don't usually take to children of earlier marriages, let alone by-blows."

"Maybe not, but it does happen."

Veronica Cardwell shook her head vigorously.

"Maureen was into domination. It was the only relationship she knew, or the only one she felt easy in. I was a spunky kid, and there was no way she was going to dominate me."

"Your father seems to have been a pretty strong-minded individual himself, but he seems to have succumbed."

"Oh, he did. Not at once, but gradually. Marriage gives so much more opportunity than other relationships. He was besotted right from the start, and she used sex, she used a vicious tongue, and she used her greater intelligence. Soon I stopped going there; it was too painful. That was around the time I started at teachers' college anyway, so there were a lot of other things in my life. If

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Billy and I met after that it was privately—in a cafe or a coffee bar, later in pubs. I knew if she got to hear he'd suffer for it later, but I wasn't going to give her total victory."

"She had other men, I believe."

"Oh yes, legions. It was part of the process of humiliation. She tried to convince him she'd had his best friend, Len, but she never quite did."

"Do you think they'd been lovers?"

"I don't know. But obviously she drove him to distraction. Well, to murder, of course. She'd told him Billy and Dorothy were having it off. He'd resisted believing for a long time, but it was a case of drips of water wearing down a stone. Eventually the little 'proofs' she produced must have driven him mad."

"And he killed her?"

"Yes."

"And you know all about this?"

"Of course."

"But . . . let me get this straight. He killed her by faking a hit-and-run accident?"

She shook her head vigorously.

"Nothing of the kind. It was more of a domestic."

"Domestic?"

"An over-the-breakfast-table thing. She told him she'd been out the night before with women friends. He refused to believe her, got more and more worked up, and in a fit of mad rage took the carving knife to her. That all came out in court, because he made no attempt to deny it. So did the fact that she *had* been with women friends the night before."

"Women friends?" It just none of it made sense. "Miss Cardwell, who are we talking about?"

"Len Parkway. He killed his wife. He was convicted of manslaughter and served seven years."

"Dorothy? He killed Dorothy? Not Maureen?"

"Good Lord, no. Maureen lived on and on, like the wicked do."

I should have thought of that. With my experience of old people and their minds I should have considered that possibility. It was like George IV—in his dotage convinced that he had led the British forces at Waterloo. The wish that he had done so was so intense that in his mind it became a fact. Len Parkway was like an Othello—an Othello who lived to old age—who had managed to convince himself that what he had done was not kill the innocent wife he loved, but what he really wished to do, what in his heart he had realized he should do, kill his tormentor Iago.

Old age had granted to Len Parkway one of its very rare acts of mercy. ●

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Bird Dog

by John Hudson Tiner

In his introduction to his own story, John Hudson Tiner says, "I write mostly nonfiction, but mysteries are my favorite recreational reading. When I do write mysteries, I like to try to create a unique detective. Here's one based on a small-town American tradition—the bird dog. A bird dog makes his living by constantly putting buyer, seller, and trader together."

Tom Jeff's day began when he walked into Millie's for breakfast and sat down with the locals. He was a bird dog, with himself as a client.

"Tires on your truck are getting bald," a young guy named Creasley said. He spoke to a farmer, Ken Grace.

Ken said, "I plan on trading it in for something smoother riding. Maybe I'll get a Cadillac, like Marvin Brucker. He's serving himself right nice now that his wife is visiting her sister in Canada."

Tom Jeff watched Creasley closely. Why, the kid was trying to cut in on his business. Tom Jeff decided then to concentrate more diligently on improving himself. His biggest goal now was to be admitted to the inner circle of the country club. Being involved in the wheeling and dealing there would increase his income by an order of magnitude.

The farmer explained about the bald tires. "You trade in a pickup and they don't give you a fair price regardless of the tires. So I replaced my good ones with the rags. Bald is beautiful." He took off his cap and ran the palm of his hand over his bald head.

Creasley nodded wisely. Tom Jeff could almost see the boy's mind working.

Tom Jeff had already made a connection. The previous day, Raymond Martin, one of the tellers at the bank, had lamented the fact that the marina charges had gotten out of hand. "Monthly slip fees have become too rich for my blood," the teller had said. "All I have is a bass boat."

Ken tossed a tip by his plate. He stood up, hitched up his pants, and walked to the cash register.

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After he paid, Tom Jeff followed the farmer outside. "How much do you want for the pickup?"

Ken said, "The blue book is fourteen hundred."

Tom Jeff said, "Everyone knows its miles are over washboard gravel roads. You'll be lucky to get a thousand."

The farmer nodded. The truck did look well used—it *was* well used.

Tom Jeff said, "Suppose I send someone to you who will offer twelve hundred?"

Ken smiled. He knew Tom Jeff's game. They'd done business before. "How much?"

"Whatever you feel comfortable giving." Tom Jeff never pushed. He figured it was worth a twenty. "Are you serious about getting a Cadillac? New or used?"

"New. I've been talking with Marvin Brucker. He's got this state-of-the-art machine—it even tells him where he is and shows him on a map."

Tom Jeff nodded and thoughtfully returned to his table.

About forty minutes later Raymond Martin, the bank teller, came in. Tom Jeff sat at the table with him, drinking coffee and listening to the conversation. If you look interested and nod as if agreeing, people remember you as a good conversationalist. Tom Jeff walked to the cash register with Raymond Martin.

"Are you still in the market for a pickup to pull your boat trailer? Leave your boat at home rather than at the marina."

"I might be," Raymond Martin said.

Tom Jeff said, "Ken Grace, the farmer—he lives out near Bristol—he's ready to sell his pickup. He wants fourteen hundred for it. Offer a thousand. He'll settle for twelve hundred."

"What do you get out of this?" Raymond asked.

Tom Jeff said, "You have this friend from Chicago, the real-estate speculator? Right?"

"We were classmates. Friends. He likes to fish. Once a month or so, he comes down and we spend a day on the lake."

Tom Jeff said, "If you get the pickup and it works out for you, then invite me to go fishing with you and your friend."

Raymond said, "I have an ironclad rule—no business of any kind. No cell phones on the boat, no beepers on the boat."

Tom Jeff agreed. "Nothing but good-ole-boy conversation."

Raymond said, "All right, sure."

While he was near the telephone (local calls only, keep them short) he dialed Harvey Hassel's number. The insurance agent answered on the second ring.

"Is Raymond Martin one of your clients?" Tom Jeff asked.

"No. Why do you ask?"

"He's about to buy a used truck. I imagine he'll want to pick

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up some insurance on it."

"All right, thanks for the tip. Lunch is on me the next time."

"Sounds good," Tom Jeff said. This particular agent was notorious for being a cheapskate. A free meal was better than nothing at all.

Quickly, before the insurance agent hung up, Tom Jeff asked, "Is Marvin Brucker one of your clients?"

"You mean the guy that has gone middle-aged crazy?" Harvey Hassel said, the distaste evident in his voice. "He can't send his payment to the home office. He has to come in and sit at my desk while he makes out the payment, pausing often to complain."

"What does he complain about?" An unhappy person was a potential client.

"Everything. He has this plot of land in the hills. It has a rock quarry on it, filled with water. He's been trying to unload it. He can't find any takers."

Tom Jeff dialed another number, that of the other insurance agent in town. Millie, the cashier and owner of the café, looked hard at him. She tapped the "keep them short" part of the sign by the phone. Tom Jeff put a dollar by the cash register. Then he thought better of it. Maybe he should go by and see Brian Stone in person. He hung up before the phone rang.

By ten o'clock, the productive part of Tom Jeff's day was almost over. He'd make a circuit around the town to pick up a few more bucks and collect on some past favors.

At the vegetable market off the square, he gently reminded the owner of a past-due account. "Sorry, Tom Jeff. It's been slow. How about a couple cases of strawberries instead."

Tom Jeff nodded. "When can I get them?"

"Any time." The man seemed relieved. He'd broken an arm earlier in the year. He didn't have any insurance. Tom Jeff had arranged for a veterinarian to set the fracture at no charge. The greengrocer was an honest soul who took seriously his promise to remember Tom Jeff for helping.

Tom Jeff began putting some information together. He stepped into the barbershop and began making calls. "Hello, Ken. It's me. You can expect a call from Raymond Martin with an offer for your pickup. How good are those tires the bald ones replaced?"

"Practically new," the farmer said.

Tom Jeff smiled. Ken didn't own anything that was practically new. "I'll trade you a case of strawberries for them."

The farmer said, "For all four?"

"Make it two cases," Tom Jeff said.

Reluctantly the farmer said, "All right, I suppose."

Definitely not new tires, Tom Jeff thought. He next called a man who earned his living by buying and selling livestock. "I've got four good used tires. I'll trade you for—"

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"What size?"

"Don't know," Tom Jeff admitted. "Off a GMC pickup. Probably seven-eighty by fifteen."

"How do you know they're good?"

"I guarantee them. Do you still have that mule? Abner? I'll trade the four tires for him."

"Sold! When will you come for him?"

"Anything wrong with him?"

"Old, half blind, but he's got a healthy appetite and poops like a trooper. He's costing me as much to keep as a thoroughbred."

Tom Jeff hung up and dialed still another number. Boots Shannon was a ridge runner. He lived in the hills north of town and eked out a living—well, Tom Jeff wasn't sure how he made his living, but he suspected it had to do with a plant with an odd number of pointed leaves.

A boy answered.

"Is your pa home?"

After a shuffle and grumble, Boots answered the phone. "What 'ya want?"

"I live merely to bring a ray of cheer into your life," Tom Jeff said. "I understand one of your sons moved away from home."

"They all do," Boots said. "As soon as they get old enough they're out of here. Can't say I blame them, and good riddance, anyway."

Tom Jeff said, "He lived in a travel trailer." It was next to his father's house, a small trailer, and run-down, but would make a great hunter's cabin. "I've got a mule I'll trade for it."

"A mule? Why in heaven's name would I want a mule?"

"Easier than walking. Unlike a vehicle, he can go anywhere. You can tromp around for miles in those woods and never grow weary."

"That's a thought. Let me ask around. It's yours if I don't find a better deal."

He wouldn't, Tom Jeff knew. The cost of hauling the trailer out would be more than it was worth. Tom Jeff smiled. That wasn't bad. From strawberries to a travel trailer in less than fifteen minutes.

Hunters bought little tracts of land in the hills so they'd have a place for their sport. He'd need to find someone near Boots who'd make it worthwhile to drag the trailer over.

He stepped out of the barbershop and walked to Brian Stone's office. Tom Jeff preferred Brian to Harvey. Brian was more generous. The man was eating a doughnut and drinking coffee from a paper cup.

Tom Jeff sat down and gave Brian a beatific smile. "How would you like to have Marvin Brucker as one of your clients? He's the farmer who has the—"

"I know who he is," the agent said. "What's the deal?"

"I think he's pretty dissatisfied with the service he's getting

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with his present agent."

"Everyone's dissatisfied with insurance," Brian pointed out.

"Marvin likes the personal touch. Why don't you drive out to his farm. Walk around with him, let him show you the spread. Then offer to come out once a month to pick up his premium."

"Most people pay every six months or even annually."

"He's got a big spread out there. He's probably the biggest farmer in the county. Tractors, equipment, crops that need hail protection, buildings, a lot of stuff. He bought a new car about a month ago—when his wife went to Canada. Drop by and admire the car. Frankly state that you're looking for his business."

"His wife went to Canada? Whatever for?"

"To see her sister. Sickness, I think."

Brian looked at him. "I know her. She's a hard case. Shrill, demanding. He'd not be the man he is today without her behind him pushing."

Tom Jeff said, "So?"

"So she's not at all pleasant."

"He's the one who takes care of the insurance."

Brian asked, "What do you want out of this? As you know, the state commission has a prohibition against unregistered insurance agents."

Tom Jeff said, "I'm not selling him the policy, I'm merely pointing him out to you."

"What do you want?"

"The next time my name is proposed as a member at the country club, will you vote for me?"

There was a long pause. Finally, Brian said, "How about one percent of his policy?"

"For how long?" Tom Jeff asked.

"For as long as he's with me," the agent said.

"The gift that keeps on giving," Tom Jeff said. But he really needed in at the country club. "If someone else advances my name, will you be one of the seconds?"

Brian looked at him suspiciously. "Who is going to propose you for membership?"

"Will you second the nomination?" Tom Jeff persisted.

"All right, you get someone to put forward your name and I'll second it."

Tom Jeff tried to keep a look of triumph out of his eyes. He'd already lined up a half-dozen people to concur. No one would oppose provided he got the nomination in the first place.

Tom Jeff said, "Good. Do you know anyone who has land around Boots Shannon's place? A hunter? I may have a cabin for sale."

"Sure. That's where Marvin Brucker has ten acres with a rock quarry."

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Tom Jeff drove to Marvin Brucker's farm. The whole thing looked deserted, as if Marvin had decided to sit out this year.

Marvin answered the door and opened it wide. "What can I do you for?" He was just a slight bit mellow. The house had a comfortable lived-in look to it. A few clothes out of place, an empty coffee cup by the television, a newspaper tossed on the kitchen table.

Tom Jeff said, "You have some hill land. The one with a rock quarry?"

"Yes, I do."

"You had it up for sale last year. Why did you take it off the market?"

"No takers. The quarry's filled with water. Everyone's afraid of a liability if one of those fool kids who sneak in during the summer were to drown."

Tom Jeff nodded. "I can understand how they must feel. Didn't you offer it to the county? Free. For a park."

"I thought I might get a tax write-off. The county didn't want it either."

Tom Jeff said, "It might sell to a hunter. Water on it is bound to attract game."

"Only if they have mighty long necks. It's not on the market anymore. I've posted the quarry and put up a good chain-link fence topped with barbed wire."

Tom Jeff nodded. "You had a pickup. Big Dodge. I see you still have it."

"Where are you going with this?" Marvin asked. He no longer appeared mellow.

"You also had an Olds. Or your wife did. I don't see it around."

Marvin said, "She's going to be away for a while. I parked her car in the barn, out of the way."

Tom Jeff nodded. "Only two of you. Most couples, when they buy a new car like the Caddy, they sell the old one. But you didn't. I generally know when cars are bought and sold. Your wife's Olds never came on the market. So I figure you still have it. But it's not in the barn. It's at the bottom of the quarry in, what, forty or fifty feet of water."

Marvin stood. "You are leaving."

"No," Tom Jeff said. "If I took my suspicions to the sheriff, he might feel it was incumbent on him to send in divers. But I'd never betray a fellow country-club member."

"You're not—"

"I will be if you nominate me."

After a heartbeat pause, Marvin said, "Love to."

Do it quickly, Tom Jeff thought. *Even with my silence, you're not going to get away with this for long.* ●

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THE JESTER AND THE MATHEMATICIAN

by Alan Gordon

My wife returned from the town with a new sheaf of paper for me, which means that I no longer have any excuses for putting off writing. I had no idea that I would live long enough to qualify as a historian, but nowadays, long life seems to be the only qualification.

My wife, bless her, is quite the pitiless taskmistress. She came to Folly later in life than I, but, as a convert, embraced it with a fanaticism rivaling that of our good friends of the Inquisition. She is adamant about having me record everything.

"While you still can," she usually adds acerbically. "Lord knows you're too old to do anything else around here. And the Guild has been asking whether or not you're still alive. What should I tell them?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet, dearest." What a blessing it is

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to have such a helpmate late in life!

The Fools' Guild relocates periodically. As they have no need of my services as a jester anymore, they generally don't bother letting me know where they are. Nor can I rely on the old troubadour routes, not since so many troubadours were wiped out for suspected heretical sympathies during the horrors of the Albigensian Crusades.

So, we sit in this pleasant little hostel funded from the usual mysterious sources and wait upon passing pilgrims. Once in a blue moon, a familiar Irish lilt will greet my ears, and we will clandestinely meet our contact and turn over my latest jottings. It was on the latest such occasion that he brought me some sad news.

Alan Gordon made his *EQMM* debut in 1995 with "The Jester and the Saint." The story also marked the debut of Theophilos the Fool, the sleuth we meet in this new tale, and in Mr. Gordon's recently published first novel *Thirteenth Night* (St. Martin's). A second book in the series, *Jester Leaps In,* is due in 2000. The author spins these marvelous tales while also pursuing a career as an attorney. ☨

"Fazio died last month," he said. "Peacefully on his farm. I thought you might want to know."

"Poor Fazio," I said. "He'd been with the Guild even longer than I had. I must be nearly the oldest now."

"You're up there," he jibed. "You certainly look older than anyone I've ever seen. I only keep coming back hoping for a chance with your widow."

"Really?" my future widow exclaimed, perking up.

"Shall I call you out at dawn?" I huffed.

"You're up at that hour anyway, old man," he retorted. "Why not?"

"Now, now," she chided him. "Don't let him waste his energy. He has more of the Guild's history to complete. Let him be."

He grinned and retired to his room.

"I'm sorry about Fazio," she said, kissing me gently. "Was he a close friend?"

"Not close. An acquaintance and a respected colleague. At least he can stop worrying now."

"What did he have to worry about?"

"It's a long story. I might as well write it down and let you read it. No point in doing things twice at my age."

She kissed me again and placed my quill and ink within reach. "I'll leave you to it, then. Good night, my love."

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She lit a single candle and placed it by my writing stand. Father Gerald used to say that any story that cannot be told by the time a single candle has burned down is too damn long, and I have lived by that advice ever since. I thought back some thirty-odd years.

It was the spring of 1198, and I had finally made it back to the Guildhall from Apulia after an unexpected delay in Assisi. I was hoping for a little rest and recuperation from my journey, but no such luck. Father Gerald was actually standing in the courtyard glaring in all directions at once. I espied some of the younger novitiates hiding in the doorway of the stables, fearfully peering at our peerless leader. I assumed, having hid in that same doorway looking at that same man with that same look when I was their age, that some practical joke had gone painfully awry, but my assumption was quickly proved wrong.

"Theophilos," he barked.

"Hail, Father," I intoned. "I have returned in triumph. Prepare the feast, slaughter the fatted calf, and throw in the skinny one, too. I have walked for leagues and have a powerful hunger."

"We expected you a week ago," he said, ignoring my speech.

"You haven't been standing here waiting all that time, have you?" I asked, concerned. I heard some suppressed giggling from the stables.

"Well, there's no help for it," he said. "You're off to Pisa."

My feet screamed in horror.

"Um, exactly why am I doing that?"

"Because I need to get a message to Fazio as soon as possible. Things are heating up with the Genoese, and we have to get the Pisans talking to them again. Which means we have to first get the Pisans talking to each other again."

"But isn't that on a troubadour route?" Back then, jesters generally stayed in one place while the troubadours traveled a regular circuit, collecting information and passing on the Guild's directives.

"It is," snapped Father Gerald. "And the preening oaf who rides it is lying in an upper room with his leg in a splint. Tantalo got drunk last night and decided to demonstrate his balancing skills on the local rooftops."

"Oh, dear. We used to tell him that if he had any talent for tumbling, he would have made a fine fool."

"His timing isn't worth a damn, either. I've just sent out all my available people. The only ones I have left are the novitiates, and they can't go to Pisa. They couldn't even find their way out of town if I was kicking their sweet behinds every step of the way . . . which I may very well do!" This last was directed at the top of his lungs in the direction of the stables. There were some muffled shrieks inside. He turned back to me and winked.

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"I'm truly sorry, Theo," he continued. "The fatted calf will keep until you get back. We'll fatten it up a little more."

"Could I at least have something to ride this time?" I asked.

"Brother Dennis!" he shouted.

Our hostler emerged from the stables.

"An ass for my gallant fool, if you please. Are those children still hiding there?"

"What children?" replied Brother Dennis innocently.

"Yes. Tell them that if they're late for class, they're on kitchen duty for a month, and that class begins the moment I get back to the hall, but that I'm old and I walk slowly."

"Certainly, Father. Come on, Theo. I'll give you Tantalo's ass. He knows the route better than his master, and drinks less."

And so I was off to Pisa.

The trip was uneventful. The ass was a good-natured beast who knew not only the route but all of the spots with the most succulent grasses. Nevertheless, we made good time and a few days later found ourselves just north of the town.

We were passing by a farm when the ass greeted a patch of clover with a bray of joy, as if he had been reunited with a long-lost friend. It was as good a place to stop as any, so I rummaged through my pouch for some bread and cheese.

My wineskin was empty, which was not surprising. There was not a wineskin made that would last me through a journey, at least not one that could fit on an ass. Sadly, I was forced to seek water.

There was a brook running beside a low stone wall that marked a pasture. The water was cold and clean. I took a long drink, then reapplied my makeup to make my entrance into the town. I looked up to see a young man seated cross-legged on the wall, gazing dreamily into the field. He was wearing a bright green and yellow cloak with the hood down. The breeze kept blowing his hair into his eyes, and he would sweep it back without any real success.

Curious, I walked up to him to ascertain the target of his gaze, but all I saw was empty pasture. He started upon my approach, then did a very creditable double take, for an amateur, upon seeing my makeup and motley.

"Forgive me, Signore," I said, bowing. "I did not intend to cause you alarm. I was intrigued by the object of your perusal."

He smiled. "Nothing to warrant any interest. I was merely counting rabbits."

I looked out upon the pasture again. "Let me assist you. There aren't any rabbits."

"Not now."

"Were there rabbits before?"

"No."

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"Are you expecting rabbits shortly?"

"Not really."

I pulled my cap and bells off my head and held them out to him. "I think, Signore, that perhaps these truly belong to you."

He laughed. "Well met, fellow fool. My name is Leonardo, son of Gulielmus Fibonacci."

"I am Forzo, the Fool." It was a name. I've had many.

"I was thinking about rabbits," he continued. "What would happen if you placed a pair in a field such as this, and in a month, they produced another pair, then that pair reaches maturity in another month while the original pair produces another, and so on."

"I myself enjoy counting sheep, but only when I am stretched out on a pallet somewhere. Why on earth do you wonder about this?"

"The sequence of numbers interests me."

"Ah. You're a mathematician, then."

"Would that I were. No, merely a merchant's son, plying his father's trade. I came in on business from Bugia, but now that the business is completed, I await the changing of the winds to travel back across the sea. Having nothing better to do, I came out here to count invisible rabbits."

"A worthwhile hobby, and an inexpensive one as well. Tell me, Signore, what if the first pair produces a litter of three?"

"Then the third doesn't get to join the party. Who will it breed with?"

"Poor little runt. Still, the problem with your conjecture is that the stock will weaken unless you breed them with some outsiders. Otherwise, your series of rabbits will peter out in the long run."

"You're being far too practical for a fool."

I offered him my cap again. "Perhaps we should trade lives."

He sighed. "Sometimes I wish I could. It would make my life simpler. I've been thinking about writing a book of mathematics, but who would read it?" He hopped off the wall. "Are you heading into town?"

"I am, and would be glad of your company. I seek an old colleague of mine."

"That would be the Great Frenetto?"

"The very one indeed."

"I know where he lives. Come, good fool."

So, my ass having had his fill, we ambled amiably onwards, and soon the towers of the city rose before us. It had been several years since I last set foot there, and I was eager to see how it had changed. Since the routing of the Saracens from Sicily, the trade had poured in, and the town had grown fat and prosperous. They

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had been working on a baptistery and a campanile to join the cathedral. I inquired as to their progress.

He gave me an amused look. "The baptistery is a fine building. All they need to finish is the dome. The campanile—well, I'll tell you about it when we get there."

We soon arrived at the great plaza. I liked the baptistery, despite my usual aversion to ecclesiastical profligacy. Like the cathedral, it was covered with pirated marble, white with dark green ornamentation. The campanile was beyond them, surrounded by scaffolding and cranes. It was about three stories to the good now, and the design was becoming apparent, the arcades echoing those of the cathedral opposite. Quite nice, yet there was something off about it.

"What is wrong with it?" I asked my companion. "I keep wanting to tilt my head slightly."

He shook his head. "Our greatest folly. They planned to build a tower to rival Babel, but they only dug the foundation ten feet. Everyone knows the ground is soft around here. It couldn't possibly support the weight. It's starting to go off the vertical. They've stopped construction temporarily and are trying to figure out what they are going to do next. I keep telling them that they should tear it down and start over, but they are talking about building it higher on one side to compensate. Ridiculous. One of the architects was from Innsbruck, but the other, Bonanno, is from here. He should have known better. So, instead of increasing the glory of Pisa, we'll become the laughingstock of the Mediterranean."

"There's still ample competition for that title."

He shrugged. "In any case, your colleague lives on the Via Roma. Take this road, then turn right when you reach the Arno. It's an inn across from the third wharf that you see."

"Thank you, Signore. I hope that you have favorable winds for your voyage home."

It didn't take me long to find Fazio. He was out back near the stables, practicing his rope-walking while juggling four knives. He caught sight of me, somehow managed to wave in the middle of all of that activity, then did a back-flip off the rope, catching all of the knives in midair before landing.

"Not bad," I said. *"Stultorum numerus . . ."*

"Infinitus est," he replied, completing the password. "Theo, riding Tantalo's ass. That can't be good. What happened?"

"He got drunk and thought he was you," I replied. "A broken leg."

"Oh, dear. Well, it's good to see you again. It must be three years."

"Five."

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"Really? Yes, I remember now. You were coming back from beyond the sea with some minor royal personage or other. I take it you bring instructions from our childless father?"

I handed him the scroll from my pouch. He slit the seal, read it briefly, then snorted.

"Reconcile the Pisans with the Genoese by midsummer. Is that all? Maybe he would like me to resolve the Ghibelline-Guelph matter while I'm at it?"

"If you have the time. I'd help, but he wants me to unify the Latin and Eastern Churches."

"By King David, if I didn't know better, I'd say we were undertaking fools' errands."

"Did you make that up yourself?"

"Hmph. Theo, I can't even get the Pisans talking to each other. Everyone here is so rich that they can't be happy unless they have more than their friends and neighbors. The only thing that ever unites them is their hatred of the Genoese. And the only thing that ever unites them with the Genoese is their mutual fear of the Saracens. Tell Father Gerald that this place is getting too big for just one fool. There must be ten thousand people here year-round, plus whatever the tradewinds bring."

"I'll tell him."

"Well, please stay a few days. It's been too long since I've done any two-man work. We could do the Mirror, and the Puppeteer, and throw knives and clubs at each other."

"Sounds like old times. I'd be delighted."

"But please, for goodness' sake, don't be funnier than me. I have to keep working here after you leave. What instruments did you bring?"

"Lute, flute, and tabor."

"You always were good on the tabor. Excellent. Here, watch this." He whirled and flung the knives with both hands in rapid succession. They plunged into the post supporting the stable roof, one above the other.

"Nicely done," I said, inspecting the alignment. "Only they're slightly off the vertical."

"Of course," he said, grinning broadly. "We're in Pisa."

We rehearsed through noon, then gathered our gear.

"There's a party at the Gherardesca palace," Fazio informed me. "No particular occasion, just the usual ostentatious display. The Podestà will be there, along with the Viscontis, the Gualandis, the Albizzonis, and so forth."

"Any topics I should play with? Or avoid?"

"I completely forgot!" he cried, stopping short. "You don't know about the Great Conundrum."

"What Great Conundrum?"

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"Oh, it's the main topic of gossip here," he said. "About two weeks ago, one of our more patriotic ladies of pleasure informed the Guard about a Saracen spy. They broke through the door, but the fellow leaped out the window and unfortunately impaled himself on the spears of the soldiers outside."

"Ouch."

"Indeed. So, they seized his things and found a letter written in Arabic script, only the words are complete nonsense."

"Some form of code."

"Of course, but it's a very good one. And that leads to the Great Conundrum: What does it mean, and more importantly, who is it for? The spy was coming here, which means that somewhere in Pisa, a Saracen agent is in place. Now, the Podestà has the letter in safekeeping. He can't show it around because he may end up showing it to the spy as a result."

"A pretty puzzle. How do they propose to solve it?"

"I planted an idea in their heads which may help. Send for an outsider who is a scholar of such things. That way, his loyalties won't be questioned. They're thinking about it. So, that's the Great Conundrum."

The palace in question was decked with pink marble. A giant pair of ebony doors led to the great hall. Above them were a series of balconies overlooking the family wharf where even now dozens of men were scurrying about unloading barges from further inland.

We, of course, did not use the ebony doors, but skulked around to the rear and came in through the kitchen. The household staff greeted Fazio, or Frenetto, with a great deal of warmth that they also extended to his friend and colleague Forzo once I had been introduced as such.

We worked our way through the crowd of guests, dropping a deft pun here, a pratfall there. The Mirror went well, the Puppeteer delighted the children. Yet we were not the principal entertainment, as it turned out.

While we were rigging Fazio's ropes from one balcony to another, a debate broke out in the group feasting below us. To my surprise, I saw the young man I had met in the morning at the center of it, his dreaminess replaced by a fierce passion.

"I am telling you that the Islamic world has surpassed us in almost every way," he shouted. "They have preserved all that is good from antiquity and are building upon it. We just continue to close our minds and refuse to change anything because change frightens us."

"These are strong words, Signor Fibonacci," said the lord of this particular house. "Are you prepared to back them up?"

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"Bring on your champion," challenged the youth. "The best man you have."

I was fully expecting armed combat at this point, but the man they brought in was of slight build and some fifty years. He was neither armed nor armored, and carried only a flat wooden case tucked under his left arm. Neither was Fibonacci prepared for instant battle. I saw not a trace of steel upon his person. I beckoned to Fazio, and we sat on the rope above the group and watched.

The challenger reached into the case and produced . . . an abacus!

"What on earth are they going to do?" wondered Fazio. "That's Biolani, the chief abacist for the Gherardescas. Fastest beader in the city, according to those who care about such things. The young man . . ."

"His name's Leonardo Fibonacci. I met him on the way in. Says he's a merchant's son."

"He's being modest. His father now holds some diplomatic post in Bugia. The son's been all over the Mediterranean, knows the Arabs inside and out. So well, in fact, that many wonder if he's the Saracen spy the message was meant for."

A crowd gathered around the two, many actually betting on the outcome before they even knew the nature of the contest.

"Ten librae on your man," said Signor Albizzoni. "I don't see how this fellow could possibly do it short of conjuration."

"Ten on Fibonacci," cried Bernardo, a lesser Gualandi. "I have no idea what you're doing, Leonardo, but I knew your father well. You have smart blood in you, lad."

Leonardo bowed in his direction and settled on a chair, crossing one leg over the other. Biolani glared at him and set his abacus on the table before him.

Signor Gherardesca stood at the head of the table. "Forty-seven plus one hundred ninety-three," he called out.

"Two hundred forty," said Fibonacci as Biolani clicked away. "Too easy."

"Three hundred twenty-seven less two hundred sixty-three."

"Sixty-four," said Fibonacci. There were shouts of astonishment from the assemblage. "Try multiplication."

Gherardesca glanced around the room as money changed hands furiously. He cleared his throat. "Four hundred and fifty-three times ninety-eight."

Fibonacci leaned back in his chair with his eyes closed, his fingers twitching slightly. Apart from the chattering beads of Biolani's abacus, there was not a sound in the room.

"Forty-four thousand, three hundred and ninety-four," said Fibonacci, smiling.

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"No!" cried Biolani, hands flying. "It isn't possible. He can't be right." He worked for another minute, then slumped in his seat, his hands falling by his sides.

"What magic is this, Leonardo?" asked Signor Gherardesca.

"No magic," replied Fibonacci. "Just superior mathematics. The Roman system is ridiculously designed for advanced calculations, but this Hindu-Arabic system is near miraculous. And I can teach anyone in this room how to use it, even Signor Biolani." All laughed, excepting the abacist, who flushed angrily.

"He's made an enemy there," whispered Fazio. "Biolani and the rest of the abacists virtually control the finances around here, thanks to the ignorance of the rest of us."

"Fibonacci's right, though," I said. "I learned the Arabic numbers when I was in Alexandria, although I would still need paper and ink to work them out. He seems to have mastered doing it with his mind alone."

"All right, check those knots again. I have work to do."

The Great Frenetto soon had the crowd enraptured, and I took the opportunity to observe them. I noticed a particularly stunning young woman in a crimson gown talking to Bernardo, the Gualandi brother who had won his bet on Fibonacci. She was gazing at the prodigy with an intensity bordering on ravin. The Gualandi said something. She laughed, never taking her eyes off Fibonacci. He turned, caught sight of her, and turned nearly the color of her gown.

A little while later, Fazio came up to me. "Yon genius has conquered more than an abacist tonight," he said. "The widow Lanfranchi seems desirous of private instruction."

"Would that be the lady in crimson?"

"I see you've spotted her. She married young and old. That is to say, she was young, her husband old. And rich, of course. One day, his ship came in with silks and spices in the hold and the husband in a coffin. Ever since then, she's galloped from one young swain to the next."

"She does tend to attract the eye."

"And other parts, apparently. I hope Signor Fibonacci is well fortified. He at least had the good taste to hire me for a serenade to start things off right."

"Good. Do you need me for a second voice?"

"No, thank you. Wait a second." He glanced around the room and laughed. "Would you be up for a bit of amusement?"

"It is only my reason to exist."

"See that unintelligent-looking fellow sulking by the fire?" I followed his gaze to see a somewhat horse-faced man staring at his feet. He looked up only to moon after the widow Lanfranchi.

"Luigi Tedesco, a merchant from Lombardy," Fazio informed

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me. "Her most recent former lover. I think he's just figured that out. Wouldn't it be funny if he hired you to serenade her tonight? A duel by proxy, with fools as their weapons of choice."

"I take it that the widow has wronged you sometime in the past."

"An unpaid serenade."

"A capital offense. All right, let me work my magic on the longing, long-faced Lombard."

I sidled over to Tedesco and leaned against the wall in an exact replica of his posture. "You seem distraught, Signore," I commented. "Perhaps I can be of assistance."

He sighed. "What could you possibly do to help me, Fool?"

"Sir, my mission in life is to fortify the forlorn, to rescue those in the fearsome clutches of boredom, and to bring parted lovers together again."

He looked up. "How do you manage the last one?"

"Signore, I am a practitioner of the craft of wooing through song. I have learned at the knees of the greatest masters of the art of courtly love. Retain me for a serenade tonight, and I assure you that you will want me for an aubade in the morning."

He brightened. "That sounds promising. What's an aubade?"

"The song sung to alert illicit lovers that dawn approaches, and that they must part to preserve appearances."

"I like the sound of that. All right, do you see that lady yonder?"

"By whose side Venus herself would blush with envy?"

"That's good!" he exclaimed. "Could you work that into the song?"

"Consider it done."

"And something with my name. It's Luigi."

"Meet me under her balcony at sunset," I said, wondering what on earth rhymed with "Luigi."

The party began to break up. Fazio and I collected our gear and some silver and returned to his room to plan the evening's entertainment.

"We should arrive by different routes," he said. "When we get close enough, I'll go ahead and seek out Fibonacci. You go around the other way and find Tedesco. This will be one well-serenaded widow."

As the sun began to set, we set forth for the lady's villa on the south part of the city. Fazio stopped me short of our destination and gave me directions to the side where her balcony was situated. I walked, tuning my lute and rewording a ballad by de Bornelh that I thought would suit the occasion. I was still puzzling over how to insert the merchant's name when I heard a woman scream. I peeked around the corner to see Fazio running in my direction.

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Someone was shouting for the guard. Dogs barked in the distance, followed by the clanking of armor.

"Come on," cried Fazio, and we took to our heels. He stopped abruptly and pulled me into an alleyway. We hid behind a pile of refuse just as several guards came running by.

"What's happening?" I whispered.

"Looks like neither of us is getting our fee tonight," replied Fazio. "My mathematician has slain your merchant."

"What?"

"As I was approaching, I heard the widow scream. Then I came upon Fibonacci standing over the body of Tedesco. He must have stabbed the poor fellow when he found out they were after the same thing." He struck himself on the side of his head. "Stupid, stupid Fazio. Have a little joke, and a man dies."

"Something's wrong there."

"Murder is rarely a righteous action, fellow fool."

We hid as the guards returned, dragging Fibonacci in chains. Four more carried the body of the late merchant on a plank.

"But he was dead when I arrived," the mathematician protested. "I never even saw him before."

"Save it," said the captain. "Plenty of time to confess in the morning."

We waited until it was quiet, then emerged from the alley.

"Poor mathematician. I fear his days are numbered," said Fazio. "It's all my fault."

"Did you see a knife?" I asked.

"What?"

"Did you see a knife? In his hand or in the body?"

"I don't think so," he said, considering. "I turned tail pretty quickly."

"Fibonacci was dressed in the same clothes he wore at the party this afternoon. Did he say he would come straight from the Gherardescas to meet you here?"

"Yes. There were going to be some games after we left."

"Then he couldn't have stabbed him. He was completely unarmed when we saw him earlier."

He stared at me. "Someone else killed Tedesco."

"Yes."

"But now Fibonacci's going to lose his head for it."

"Unless we do something about it."

He sighed. "I guess we have to, don't we? All right, let's go take a look at the widow's balcony."

We strolled and strummed together, looking the way two fools ought to look in early evening. There were still several guards scurrying beneath the balcony when we went by. There was a crowd of onlookers watching from a distance, kept back by the

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sight of several spearpoints glinting in the light of the ascending moon.

"What do you think they're looking for?" wondered Fazio.

"Maybe the missing knife. Look, up there."

The widow was momentarily at the window, watching the activity below.

"Would you say that she is smiling?" I murmured.

"I would. Strange. One might think that the terror of such an experience, coupled with the simultaneous loss of past and future lovers, would have more of a heartrending effect on such a tender soul."

"Yet it has not. Let's go back to your place. I don't think we can get anything accomplished tonight."

He lit a candle while I unrolled my bedroll and stretched out.

"Who else would have a motive for killing Tedesco?" I asked.

"If we're talking about rivals for the widow's favors, then half the eligible bachelors in town, not to mention quite a few married men."

"Any other reasons? Enemies of Lombardy? Commercial competitors?"

"He's never struck me as the sort to make enemies. He's an unassuming fellow, competent but not exceptional at his work. Pays his debts on time, doesn't drink to excess, and is not possessed of sufficient wit to insult anyone to that extreme."

"Then why was he killed? Unless . . ." I sat up. "What if he was not the intended victim?"

"There's a thought. Someone wanted to kill Fibonacci, and waited in the shadows for a lusty swain to arrive. Only he got the wrong lusty swain."

"And fled, leaving Fibonacci to be caught with the body. Now, the Podestà may finish the task for him."

"Which leads us to the question of why kill Fibonacci?"

I fluttered my fingers across a row of imaginary beads. He nodded.

"It's a good place to start," he said. "We'll seek out Biolani in the morning."

The abacist was in the counting house, counting someone else's money. We barged in and sprawled across his table.

"Get out, fools," he growled. "Unlike you, I have to work for a living."

"As do we," protested Fazio. "Harder than you, in fact, with far less in return. Oh, that these fingers could have acquired your skill with beads rather than the useless plucking of lutestrings."

Biolani sat back and glared. "I have no need of entertainment. Leave before I call the guard."

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"It is those who say they have no need of entertainment who oft need it the most," I observed. "But call the guards if you must. We have no objection. We would welcome their presence in your office."

He looked at us suspiciously. "What would you here?"

"We just dropped by to congratulate you on your good fortune," cried Fazio. "A recent rival of yours has been most discomfited."

"Rival? Who, the Albizzonis' abacist?"

"A rival to all of your profession," I said. "And one who publicly humiliated you yesterday."

He snorted. "That pup, Fibonacci. So, what happened? Did he fall into the Arno?"

"Haven't you heard?" asked Fazio. "He was on his way to an assignation, only to find an assassination."

"Is he dead then?" asked Biolani.

"Would that grieve you?" I asked.

"I'm sorry for any man's loss," he replied carefully. "Actually, I was quite impressed by the lad. If he knows a faster way of doing this, I would be happy to learn it."

Fazio and I looked at each other. "But wouldn't that deprive you of your domain?" I asked.

Biolani chuckled. "My lords and masters are wealthy, stupid men who need poor, smart people like me to do their work for them. Whether by beads or by this Arabic system, it will still be Biolani who is trusted to count their money."

"So, you aren't worried about Fibonacci's fate?"

"Hasn't it been decided already?"

"It is in the Podestà's hands."

He looked puzzled. "But I thought you said he was murdered."

"Oh, dear," said Fazio. "I've muddled it again. No, Luigi Tedesco was killed, and they are saying Fibonacci did it to gain the widow's favors."

Biolani shrugged. "Foolishness. A pity that the young don't see the futility of lust until it's too late."

"Or greed," I said. "Consider sharing a coin with those who share such priceless news."

"Gossip is always free. Get out."

We got out.

"Not much reaction there," I commented.

"He even sounded sincere about wanting to learn the new system," said Fazio. "Maybe we should go back to the idea of another suitor for our widow."

"You know the gossip of this town. Who is a possibility?"

He pondered the question for some time as we walked along the river. "She's been dallying with Tedesco quite happily for the last

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two months. I was a little surprised that she would drop him so readily."

"Even given the impressive performance at the party? It may have piqued her interest when she saw what Fibonacci could do."

He shook his head. "That puzzles me as well. She's not a creature susceptible to the attractions of the mind. Her desires are decidedly more physical in their expression. And Fibonacci, although a pleasant enough fellow, is not exactly what I would consider meat for her table."

"Then maybe it was her intention to kill him," I said. "She lured him into a trap."

"But what would she have against him?" he protested. "What would anyone have against him? He's just a merchant. And he's been here all winter. Why now?"

"Something had to happen recently to make someone see him as a threat. Maybe something at the party." I stopped.

"Why are you striking yourself on the head?" asked Fazio with concern. "That's one of my moves."

"Chastising my brain for working so slowly," I said. "It's your Great Conundrum. What if the code requires not only knowledge of Arabic, but of the Arabic numbers?"

"And Fibonacci revealed that he had the ability to break it when he gave his demonstration last night! Excellent. You've narrowed the suspect list down to the hundred people at the party. Tell you what, let me buffet you a few times about the noggin and see if anything else falls out."

I waved my hands over my head like a cheap magician, tapped it once, and pretended to pull something out of my mouth which I then mimed reading.

"Tell me what you know about Bernardo Gualandi," I said.

"Why him?"

"Because he was talking to our widow right before she sought out Fibonacci."

"Interesting. Let's see. He's the third brother, so not in line for the lion's share of the business. Probably has the most talent in the family, but gets shipped around looking after their interests overseas. Speaks Arabic, which qualifies him. As far as the widow—I remember now, he came back on the same ship that carried her husband's body home for burial. He was unusually solicitous towards the poor grieving waif. Tongues were wagging briefly about it, but nobody knew for certain what they were up to."

"Maybe he knows something he could blackmail her with. Sounds like an excellent candidate."

"Even so, how do we go about proving it?"

"I have one idea."

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Later that morning, we unfortunately got into an argument in the street.

"It couldn't have been that many," he protested.

"It was," I said. "How would you know? You weren't the one who went with them, you coward."

"Me? A coward?" he shrieked. "How dare you! Look, you've always stretched the truth, but this time I have you."

"Tell you what, we'll settle this fairly," I said. "You, sirrah. A favor, if you please." I grabbed a man passing by. It just so happened that it was Bernardo Gualandi. He stopped and looked at us in exasperation.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Just to settle a wager between my brother fool and myself," said Fazio. "My colleague Forzo believes that since he trailed after the last Crusade begging their crumbs in exchange for his piteous attempts at amusement that he is now an expert on military matters."

"We've been having a dispute over how many soldiers passed through this town en route to the Holy Land," I said. "Now, I remember that there were fifteen boats leaving from Venice, and they each carried a hundred and thirty Crusaders. I say that makes two thousand men."

"And I say it makes eighteen hundred," said Fazio.

Gualandi looked at us wearily. "You're both wrong. It's nineteen hundred and fifty. Now, settle your differences and leave me alone."

"A thousand pardons," I said, bowing low.

"Nineteen hundred and fifty pardons," said Fazio, bowing even lower.

Gualandi walked away.

We turned into a narrow alleyway. The Podestà was standing there, watching Gualandi disappear.

"Very interesting," he said. "Come with me."

Fibonacci was being held in, what else, a tower, guarded heavily from below and inaccessible by any other means. The Podestà produced a set of keys from his robes and opened the entryway. The guards looked at us with mild curiosity, but made no comment. We climbed a long, spiral staircase until we came to the highest landing in the building. Another door gave way to the Podestà's keys to reveal Fibonacci sitting disconsolately by the window of his cell. He leapt to his feet upon our entry.

"Signore, you must believe me," he said urgently. "I am innocent of this foul deed."

The Podestà looked at him for a moment, then reached into a pouch at his waist and pulled out a sheaf of papers which he tossed onto a small table.

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"These papers contain a message to someone in this town," he said. "I want you to decipher it, and tell me what it is you are doing as you do it. I will then take it to someone else to see if you are correct."

Fibonacci looked back and forth at us and the papers, then sat by the table and scanned them. "The characters are Arabic," he said. "But they make no sense. There are no words here. However . . ." He stopped. "Look how the letters of the words line up vertically. If you read them that way, they spell out the names of the Hindu-Arabic numbers. And if you were to take the numbers and apply them to the corresponding Arabic letters as they occur in their alphabet, they start to spell out, 'Bernardo Gualandi. Your information regarding the Pisan shipping routes proved accurate. Return by messenger the Gherardesca shipments and the boats carrying them.' It goes on."

"No need," said the Podestà. "I shall return later. Take hope, Leonardo." He motioned to us, and we followed him back down the stairs.

"I would prefer it if you kept quiet about your roles in this," he said.

"Suits us fine," said Fazio. "And we would request that you keep quiet about our roles in this as well. It's hard enough work being a fool without being called upon to solve murder cases all the time."

"I wouldn't worry about that," said the Podestà. "How often do people get murdered around here?"

There would be one more, as it turned out.

Fibonacci's solution to the Great Conundrum was confirmed, and he and Gualandi soon traded places. Shortly thereafter, Fazio received a message that we found greatly disturbing.

"Gualandi wants to speak with us," he informed me.

"What on earth for?"

"Let's go and find out."

We received permission to entertain the prisoners and eventually climbed to the top cell in the tower which Gualandi now called home.

"What shall it be?" asked Fazio. "A song? Some juggling?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of an escape act," said Gualandi.

"Really?" I replied. "Why would we do that?"

"Because I know about the Fools' Guild," he said.

"Everyone knows about the Fools' Guild," said Fazio. "All the best fools get their training there. So what?"

"Not everyone knows about the Guild's underlying mission," he said. "I know that you are spies and manipulators of kings, popes, and everyone underneath."

"Given that we regard kings and popes as the lowest of the low,

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that doesn't leave many others," commented Fazio. "But you speak of vague fancies, Signore. What proof have you?"

"It just so happens that I got drunk with a troubadour of your acquaintance," he replied. "One Tantalo. He got even drunker than I, and told me quite a few interesting stories."

"Oh, dear," Fazio and I said simultaneously.

"I know that you are working with your counterpart in Genoa to bring peace between the two cities. Not a bad idea on its face, but there are many here who might resent the effort. Such knowledge of your activities could be kept secret for a small price."

"Your freedom," I stated.

"There you have it. There's little time. A decision concerning my fate will be made by tomorrow."

"But we can't just walk you down the stairs past the guards," protested Fazio.

I glanced out the window. It was a good sixty feet to the flagstones below. Another tower faced us from across the street.

"There's a way," I said.

Around midnight, Fazio and I perched on the top of the tower facing the jail. A candle was lit in the uppermost cell, and I drew my bowstring back past my ear and sent an arrow arcing across the street into Gualandi's cell. The string tied to the end uncoiled rapidly. Gualandi pulled the arrow from his door and held the string taut. I slipped the bow over the string and sent it spinning across. He took it, threaded the arrow and string around the leg of his cot, and shot it back in our direction. It landed on the tower roof beside us.

We tied a sturdy rope to our end of the string and began to coil up the end by the arrow. The rope traveled the string's route to the cell, then around the cot leg and back to our perch, giving us a two-rope bridge high over the guards below. So far, nothing we had done had made enough noise to attract their attention.

I tied both ends of the rope tight around the iron loop of the door leading to the steps. Then, the Great Frenetto, another rope secured around his waist, walked lightly across the street into Gualandi's cell.

He held the second rope about four feet over the first. I held it tight at my end, and Gualandi carefully made his way from one tower to another, clinging to the upper rope for security. Once he had made it over, Fazio practically danced his way back, carrying the bow. We untied the rope ends, then pulled carefully back until the end repassed the anchoring cot leg. Then I gave it a good, hard tug, and it sailed safely back into our waiting arms, leaving another Great Conundrum for the Pisans: How did Gualandi

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escape the highest cell of the jail without leaving a trace of his flight?

We sneaked him down the stairs and through a back alley, then scampered northwards.

"Nicely done," he whispered as we approached the holy trinity of cathedral, baptistery, and campanile. "I'll definitely be able to make good use of you fellows."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "We've done our part." Fazio drifted behind us, looking back to make sure no one was following.

Gualandi smiled. It wasn't a pleasant sight. "If my knowledge of the Guild will make you do this, then it will make you perform other tasks I have in mind. I'm taking the two of you with me."

"Maybe we should leave you here," I said. "As it happens, I heard that the Podestà was thinking of using you to Pisa's advantage. He was planning to keep you alive."

"Unlike us," said Fazio, and his hands fluttered in the darkness.

Gualandi pitched forward, four knives in a perfect vertical formation in his back.

"Nice placement," I commented.

Fazio shrugged. "Just wanted to show you I can do it if I want to." He turned suddenly. "There's a patrol coming! What are we going to do?"

"Run?"

"We can't leave him," he said in panic. "The Podestà is sure to suspect us. We have to get rid of his body. But how?"

And then . . .

"And then what?" asked my wife, shaking me awake.

"What?" I mumbled.

"You fell asleep before you finished," she said accusingly. "What did you do with Gualandi's body? And why was Fazio still worrying afterwards?"

"There was a construction pit nearby," I said. "We dragged him to it, pulled our cloaks over it, and buried him with our hands."

"Oh, is that all?" she said, disappointed. Then she frowned. "Wait a minute. The only construction site would have been . . . You mean to say you buried him at the campanile?"

"As Fibonacci said, the ground was soft there," I said, grinning. "The scandal died down eventually, but the tower of Pisa leaned more and more, and Fazio lived in constant terror that they would dig up the foundation and find a corpse with a characteristic set of knife wounds in its back.

"We saw Fibonacci later that day . . ."

"I understand that I have the two of you to thank for my freedom," said the mathematician, blushing slightly.

"Us?" said Fazio, puzzled. "It was the Podestà who freed you,

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and you who led him to the true murderer. We were just passing through."

"If you say so," said Fibonacci.

"We do," I said. "This will all be forgotten soon enough, and we will be forgotten even sooner."

"Not by me," he said firmly, and he clasped our hands in a friendly farewell. "By the way," he added. "Did you hear that Gualandi escaped?"

"He won't get far," Fazio assured him.

"Not horizontally, anyway," I added.

Fibonacci looked at us, puzzled. "Your meaning, Fool?"

"It is my belief that he's going straight to Hell. Good day, Signore."

"I remember him!" my wife said excitedly. "When we were at the court of Frederick the Second, we visited Pisa. The emperor challenged this mathematician to solve some incomprehensible problems, and we all gathered and watched while he did it. That was your Fibonacci!"

"It was, my dove. Look at this." I pulled down a copy of the *Liber abaci* from a shelf and handed it to her.

"From him?" she asked. I nodded. She opened it to where I had placed a bookmark. "There it is! 'A certain man put a pair of rabbits in a place surrounded by a wall . . .'" she read. "Let's see. One, two, three, five, eight, thirteen, twenty-one . . . Well, it's a pretty series, but of what use could it possibly be?"

"None that I know of, but I'm just an ancient fool."

"There's an inscription here."

"Read it."

She smiled at me as she did, which was all the reward I needed in life. "'To my many-named friend: The number of fools is finite, but of the counting of many rabbits there is no end. Yours, Fibonacci.'" ●

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The Fibonacci sequence has tantalized mathematicians and scientists for centuries. Related to the so-called Golden Mean, its numbers have been found to describe the patterns of seeds in sunflowers, scales on pine cones, and possibly even atomic nuclei and business cycles.

After decades of skirmishing, Genoa defeated Pisa in the Naval Battle of Meloria in 1284. The campanile, as of this writing, is still leaning.

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Death of a Green-Eyed Monster

by William Bankier

Many of William Bankier's stories involve a shift in scene to or from the fictional Canadian small town he calls Baytown and the very real sights of Los Angeles. The tension the author sets up between these two very different worlds may reflect his own sense of belonging to both (or perhaps neither) place, for the author is a Canadian by birth but a long-time resident of L.A. ✝

Jealousy was Norman Mead's closest friend. The sick feeling of distress had been part of his experience for as long as he could remember. It predated his marriage to Bessie Turner. The green-eyed monster showed up way back in Baytown when he began attending high school and became old enough to fall in love.

Nowadays, the neurosis was focussed on Max Holland, a successful artist who was Bessie's discovery and who lived in an old house above the beach in Malibu. Mead could make himself squirm by recalling the recent afternoon he drove there, parked a half-mile away, and walked to Holland's front door where he knocked as abruptly as a hotel detective.

Holland had looked surprised when he opened the door. He was in work clothes, shades of acrylic streaked on hands and wrists. "Norman, what a pleasant surprise! Come on in!"

"I was driving up the coast, thought I'd say hello."

The artist was puzzled. He was Bessie's friend, not Norman's, so the unexpected visit made no sense. But he was gracious. "Have some coffee with me. I need a break."

Mead stood around in the kitchen making small talk. It was obvious Bessie was not here. She had driven away that morning on nameless errands. Soon thereafter, the nasty fantasy arose in

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Mead's mind. He bit down on it like a bad tooth for hours, releasing the poison in measured doses, enjoying control of his own misery. Hoping to catch Bessie at it, he was wrong this time. But his suspicion of his wife was still strong. The fact that she had not come to frolic on this occasion did not mean Bessie Turner Mead and Max Holland were not having an affair.

"Are you still working?" Bessie was outside the door of the spare bedroom Mead used as an office. He picked up his pen and crouched over the scribbled pages. He was a freelance copywriter these days, deriving most of his assignments from the Santa Monica ad agency where he used to go five days a week. Working at home freed him from seeing his father-in-law every day. It was Lyman Turner's firm. He occupied the corner office with his jovial laugh and his cigar and his prying eyes.

"Come on in," Mead called.

"The mail is here." Bessie approached him looking brightly alive. "Something for you from back home."

A Canadian stamp on a business envelope; it was a message from his old friend Phil Stone. Mead scanned it, then read it aloud. "End of July is the thirtieth anniversary of the Park Pavilion. To mark the occasion, we are getting the original band together to play the dances that Friday and Saturday. Can't do it without old Normie Mead on tenor. Write or call, Norm, and say you'll come. Should be a happy gig."

Mead practiced every other week with a garage band in Venice. He was still able to play. But something was holding him back from responding with enthusiasm. "I don't know." He tossed the letter aside. "Lot of travel for two days."

"Stay longer. Make a holiday of it."

"Come with me. You've never seen Baytown."

"This is your thing. You should go alone."

Bessie was dressed for the gym. She had begun working out a couple of months ago. She looked good, pounds lighter, muscles toned under smooth skin. The new hair was also a success, trimmed extra short and streaked with gold.

"I'll think about it," he said.

Like many Californians, when pressure built up inside him, Mead got in his car and drove. He did so now, speeding at first, then cooling out and slowing down.

There had been more to marrying Bessie Turner than achieving financial security. It had been love at first sight; the money was a bonus. He learned eventually that there were two parts to Bessie's decision as well. Her father had always inspected her boyfriends, rejecting them with scorn and ridicule. This time, Bessie shut the old man out.

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It was the summer of Expo '67, the World's Fair. Bessie flew to Montreal from California, having wangled a job as a greeter in the Biosphere, the U.S.A. Pavilion. Here, she met the young saxophone player from Baytown. Mead had auditioned for and landed a job with the official band that played sessions every day at various locations around "Terre des Hommes."

Fate arranged their meeting. The band was set up on a patio beside the Biosphere. A crowd gathered and it included Bessie Turner on a raised walkway. They were playing "Perdido"; it was Norman Mead's solo. Spotting the pretty girl up there in her U.S.A. uniform, he blew chorus after chorus in her direction while the crowd went wild. When it was over, during the applause, Mead took off his shades and smiled up at her.

From that day, they spent all their free time together. A week before the Fair ended, they got married in the vestry at St. James United Church on Ste. Catherine Street. "I can't help worrying about your parents," he said as they packed for the flight to California.

"I sent Mom a picture of us. She thinks you're a knockout. As for Dad, leave him to me."

Traffic was light that afternoon. Mead found himself on the Santa Monica front. He parked on a meter and went to stand against the wooden railing looking down on the ocean surrounding the midway on the pier. Cirque de Soleil was in town; their giant blue tent nearly filled the parking lot beside the pier. A dozen big rigs, the wheels of an invading army, were parked around the big top.

It seemed appropriate to Mead that he was looking at the famous Canadian circus while considering an invitation to return to Baytown. He would accept. He would telephone Phil Stone and tell him he would be there.

Mead began to think about Suzie Cullen. He was back home, the time was thirty-five years ago, and the events began to play out as vividly in his mind as if they were happening right now.

He and Suzie were both sweet sixteen. They were attending a carnival up near the CN station. Carousel music acted on his mind like a euphoric—a swirling, piping rendition of "Waltz of the Flowers." He could smell mustard and fried onions. Bizarre paintings on canvas lined the midway.

Suzie had gone to the latrine. She was overdue; he went looking for her. He found her playing a silly game with Sid Harper, a dimwit from the other high school. Sid had apparently tossed her a football because she was running with it across the grass and he was pretending to tackle her. The peasant blouse was down off one shoulder, her bare legs flashing as she tried to elude his grasp. She was not trying very hard. Sid grabbed her around the

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waist and now they were pressed together, his hands touching her breasts.

Mead's rage was beyond anything he had ever allowed himself to express. He often felt anger inside when he saw an animal being mistreated or when his mother went on screaming at his father and the old man said nothing but just left the room.

"Stop it!" He ran across the grass and pulled them apart. He imagined his face bursting. "Cut it out!"

Afterwards, Suzie was excited. She appeared pleased at his reaction. Mead felt sick. Sid was gone, no telling what he was thinking.

Horns began blasting on the street behind him. There had been a near fender-bender. Mead turned and observed the scarlet face, the bulging eyes of the offended driver. Would Suzie Cullen still be around when he made his sentimental journey back to Baytown? How about Sid Harper? The green-eyed monster was having a great old time feasting on this event from the past. It believed Sid should have been killed for messing with Mead's girl.

The Air Canada flight set down in Toronto. Mead collected his baggage, took possession of a rental car, and followed signs to get himself out of the city. On 401 heading east, he began to feel at home. Here was familiar farming country, barns and silos set back from the highway, distant houses that looked deserted sheltering under shade trees.

Nearing Baytown, he saw a motel on the right side of the road with the vacancy light on. He wheeled in, parked, signed a card, and paid for only one night in advance. His intention was to call Suzie Cullen, and you never knew what might happen.

The first call, however, was to Bessie back home. "I'm here. Safe and sound at the Bide-A-Wee Motel. Take down the number."

Bessie sounded very laid-back, the way she did when she was smoking weed. "How was your trip?"

"Boring. Maybe something will happen now I'm here."

The next call was to Phil Stone, the bandleader. "Norman Mead reporting for duty, sir."

"Glad you made it. The band is now complete. Except for percussion. Danny died last year."

"Danny died?"

"He topped himself. The auditors found a shortage at the bank."

It would not be the same band without Danny. Mead sensed his visit was starting off on the wrong foot. "Do you intend to rehearse?"

"I think so. But there should be no problem with the old charts: 'Blue Rain,' 'Tangerine.' Let's get together at the Pavilion, Saturday afternoon at two."

And now, finally, the call to Suzie Cullen. Mead still had her number memorized so he dialed it, aware that it might have

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changed three times since he left town. But the telephone was lifted after the first ring and there was the provocative voice, sensuous, intimate.

"Damn," Mead said. "You were waiting for my call. Just like the old days."

"When I saw the posters for the dance, I wondered if you'd come back."

"Are you still in the old house?"

"No. I have a flat on Bridge Street. Near the Armoury."

"Are you married?"

"Who'd marry anybody in this place?"

"I thought you might be hooked up with Sid Harper."

"Still thinking about that, Normie? Travel didn't broaden you at all."

"Can I buy you dinner?"

"I ate. You can buy me a drink."

"Say where."

"The Coronet Lounge. They have good music there. Remember the blind guy with the dog?"

It should not have surprised Mead, but it did. Suzie Cullen had turned into a middle-aged woman. In a sports windbreaker—New York Yankees—and grunge jeans tucked into cowboy boots, she looked as if she had wandered in from a truck stop. But the curly chestnut hair still had sparkle and so did the emerald eyes.

But it was her hands. Mead got up from his table, joggling the empty beer bottles. He took both her hands and drew her to him. The warm fingers, the electricity, restored an intense connection from years ago.

"Look at the guy from California in his expensive suit."

"Look at the hometown girl."

They tried a brief kiss, got it on the record.

"Maybe we should just go home."

"Sit down and drink your beer. Which I see you've been doing."

He ordered her a Margarita, something they would not have served in Baytown in the old days. The piano player watched the room with sightless eyes as he played "Lullaby of Birdland." His big dog, who hated the music, lowered his head and waited for the set to end.

When it did, they went outside and he led her down the lane to the parking lot by the riverbank. "This is my rental." He pressed her hand on the shiny hood. "Want to sit inside?"

"I stopped doing it in cars a long time ago."

"Who says we have to do it? I'm a married man."

"Yeah, sure."

"How are you, Suzie?"

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"Really? I'm sad. Remember the song? Ian and Sylvia? The good times all are gone and it's time for moving on."

"I moved on and I'm sad."

"What's your problem?"

"I work for my wife's father."

"Music used to make you happy."

"I play some, in a pickup band. Hell, I dreamed of being Lester Young."

"There was a happy guy." She let her head rest against his chest. "Who would have thought when we were teenagers we'd end up in such a sorry state."

"I got a song to go with yours. Peggy Lee. Is that all there is? If that's all there is, let's keep on dancing . . ."

Mead put his arm around her and her free hand fell automatically into his. He drew her close and they began to move together, slowly, on the broken pavement. Her hair smelled of shampoo and there was something reassuring about her weight against him.

"Just like Saturday night at the Pavilion," she murmured. She kissed his cheek.

"Let's get in the car."

"You're a married man."

"With a wife three thousand miles away."

"Like hell. She's right here."

They stood looking at the river twenty feet below the stone parapet. Moonlight illuminated rocks and weeds and stagnant water.

"Where is Sid Harper these days?"

"He's down there." She indicated the bay. "He works for the boat livery. He has a cabin on the wharf. If I screamed, he'd probably hear me."

The information raised Mead's heartbeat and tightened his muscles. "You hang out there quite a lot?"

"Are you crazy? It's a miserable little place."

"Describe it to me."

"I don't believe this. You're a baby."

"Does he make the bed? Do you make it for him?"

"You like hurting yourself. You won't hurt me."

Suzie walked away fast down the alley. He caught up with her outside the hotel. "Do you want to go back in?"

"I want to go home. You don't have to come."

"I only said . . ."

"Jealousy is so stupid." She looked up at him and the pale light revealed a face that was old and wise. "You're sad like me. And you fight it by making yourself mad."

Maybe she wanted him to walk after her but he let her go across the market square and past the Armoury to wherever her apart-

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ment was. He would never see the inside of it, he realized now. Never find out if she still had the old sofa, the lamp he used to switch off so she could sleep in his arms while the radio glowed green and whispered in the dark.

Mead started walking. The water smelled like soup as he approached the bay. He walked between the swings and slides of a playground. Then came the gravel of an empty parking lot leading to the wharf. His heels echoed on weathered planks as he passed a galvanized iron warehouse. A painted sign introduced the line of boathouses: "Baytown Boat Livery. Canoes, skiffs—$1.00 an hour. No fishing." The window of Sid Harper's cabin was lit by the flicker of a television screen. A familiar sitcom theme began to play as Mead rapped on the door.

Harper opened up and peered out at the tall figure in the moonlight. He was barefoot, in cut-off shorts and torn T-shirt.

"Hi, Sid. It's Norm Mead."

"Hey, come on in!" Sid moved back and opened the door all the way. "Look at you. You look like you stepped out of a bandbox. You probably did!" They both laughed.

"Is it too late?"

"No. Sit down. Want a beer?"

As he went to the fridge, Harper said, "The cable runs these old Lucy shows back to back."

"Don't let me interrupt your watching."

"It's okay. I've seen every episode three times." He switched off the set and handed Mead a beer. "I hope you don't mind the tin. I gave up glasses down here."

"I prefer the tin." Mead popped the lid. Harper's face was jowly, his eyes apologetic. But the chunky body looked in shape from heaving boats in and out of the water.

"We knew you'd be coming back."

"Who's we?"

"Everybody. The posters are all over Front Street."

"I thought you meant you and Suzie Cullen."

"You saw Suzie? She still looks good, eh?"

"You oughta know, Sid."

"I would have thought you two had more to talk about than me."

As Mead's heartbeat slowed down, as his mind began to clear, he became aware that Sid Harper was being respectful. This poor middle-aged guy in his ratty clothes, watching reruns here in the shack that went with his low-end job, he was impressed by the arrival of a figure from the past. Mead had gone away and made it. Or so it seemed.

The realization did nothing to put Mead at ease. The part of him that wanted to pick a fight was not satisfied. Sid said, "I hear you're in California now."

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"I'm married."

"And you never give a thought to the old folks at home."

"Not true. I think about you quite often."

"Go to hell." Sid seemed pleased.

"I remember what a bastard you were, messing with Suzie. You knew she was going steady with me."

"I never messed with her."

"The night at the carnival. I had to pull you apart."

Blank eyes suggested Sid really did not recall the event. But he was beginning to summon up some resentment. "Suzie was a flirty girl. She went steady with you but she played with every guy she ran into. We all had fun with Suzie."

"That's a lie."

"Are you getting pissed about it now? You were blind. You never got it. She wanted to have fun."

"I don't believe you." The anger boiling up in Mead was superb. It was strong and full of hot blood.

"Suzie lived her life. You're the problem. You never knew how to relax and enjoy yourself."

"I should have gone after you when it happened."

"Nothing happened. Holy mackerel, you came here to tell me this?"

Mead got up. His foot hit the can on the floor. Beer poured onto the tattered carpet. The door was open. He went through onto the wharf. The passage of time had changed nothing. He had been incapable of fighting Sid when the insult took place and, despite his anger, he was incapable now.

"You're pathetic," Sid said, padding out after him onto the damp boards. "You're still a little kid. You're not a man. And get the right clothes on. You don't walk around Baytown on a summer night like you're going to church." He put a finger under Mead's necktie and flipped it up into his face.

Instinctively, Mead swung his arm and knocked Sid's hand away. Sid grabbed him by the wrist, hard enough that it hurt. Mead planted the flat of his hand in the other man's face and pushed. Sid lost his balance and, arms flailing, fell backwards onto the wharf. There was a loud crack as the back of his head struck wood.

Mead bent over him. The unconscious man was making a bubbling sound at the lips. He twitched convulsively. Mead acted without thinking. He put his hands under Sid's body and rolled him over the edge into the water. The pale shape of the body floated facedown just below the surface. Mead reached into the water, which felt warm, and pressed the body down. It sank into darkness. Bubbles rose and broke the surface.

For a few minutes, Mead knelt on the boards, staring out onto

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the reflection of the moon on the water. This was a terrible thing. Lacking what it took to fight Sid face-to-face, he had murdered him while he was unconscious.

The town clock struck the hour. Mead got up and hurried off the wharf and past the playground, looking for a telephone.

One of the cops who responded turned out to be Freddy Kemp. Mead remembered him from Baytown High. The other was a big, silent type in a belt that squeaked. Mead kept his story simple. He was in town for the band date. He had been at the Coronet drinking beer. He wandered down to look at the bay and ran into Sid. He was high when Mead arrived.

They drank and talked and watched television. When Mead was leaving, Sid was clowning around on the wharf. He lost his balance and fell over the edge. Maybe he hit his head, but he never came up.

They went back to the station by the market square where Kemp called in some off-duty officers to search for the body. Mead made a statement and signed it. Then he was free to go.

Back at the Bide-A-Wee Motel, he lay on the bed, fully dressed, with the lights out. He tried to feel sorry about Sid Harper, but it was not there. The guy had been an irritation and he was gone. Maybe now the obsession would be over.

But Sid was not gone. Mead could think of nothing but the dead man's declaration that Suzie, while she was going steady with Mead, had been everybody's friend. It seemed possible. He could see her, ripe and cute and full of zest, acting saucy with willing guys at every opportunity. There was touching and kissing . . . and more. Mead lay in the dark feeling excited and, finally, sick at heart and ashamed of himself.

He reached for the telephone and dialed Bessie in California. The machine message came on but she picked up before it was complete.

"How are things? You sound zonked."

"It's not good. Something bad has happened."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm okay. But it's a bad scene here. I can't discuss it on the telephone. Can you come up?"

"I would if I could. But I've got things planned."

"I need you, Bess."

"I'm sorry, Normie. I just can't. What's going on?"

"Never mind. I'll tell you when I see you."

Mead put down the telephone and lay back in the dark with his eyes open. Bessie had sounded evasive. She had plans. His call for help meant nothing to her. He cast his mind back to when he received the invitation from Phil Stone. He had been of two minds

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about it, but she was eager for him to go. "Take all the time you want," had been her suggestion. As if she was eager to get him out of town.

He imagined his wife on the telephone as soon as he left for the airport. "He's gone," she said. She threw her slippered feet up onto the edge of the bed and her red silk kimono fell open revealing smooth, creamy legs. She ran a hand through waves of hair.

Mead imagined the man's voice over the line. It was Max Holland. "How nice," the artist murmured. "When can you be here?"

He must have slept because when the telephone rang and he opened his eyes, the room was bright. It was Freddy Kemp. They had dragged up Sid's body. A contusion on the back of the head suggested that he had, as Mead told them, concussed himself when he fell. It was a sad accident, but Mead should try to put it behind him and get on with his visit.

Mead made two more calls. The first was to Phil Stone. "You're up early," the bandleader said.

"I've been talking to California. My wife is ill. I'm really worried about her."

"Sorry to hear that."

"I have to go, Phil. I hate to hang you up. Can you get somebody else?"

"There's another tenor we work with. I'm just sorry you won't be with us. We were going to have a lot of fun."

The next call, the final one, was to Suzie Cullen. She was slower in answering this time. He was about to hang up when she came on the line, sounding sleepy. "Did I wake you? I'm sorry."

"What's up?"

"I have to go back to L.A. My wife is not well."

"Too bad."

"You'll be hearing about Sid Harper. He's dead."

He told her the police version of what had happened. "He was very drunk. That and the way he hit his head must be why he drowned. It's a shame. We were getting along. He wasn't such a bad guy."

"I'm glad for you, Norm. You had a chance to finish old business. Your mind is at ease."

Mead checked out of the motel, got in the car, and drove back to Toronto. The visit had been a bad idea. Nothing seemed right. It was as if his friends—the town itself—had never forgiven him for going away. Baytown had gone down a strange path in the intervening years. He would never be welcome there again.

In Toronto, he had to wait several hours for the next flight to L.A. He drank all he could in a bar. Then he sat in the departure lounge, trying to read a newspaper, dozing in his seat.

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Back in the Expo era, Bessie Turner had really cared about him. He thought about the difference between then and now. He had been a cowboy in those days, a freelance. This was what she had been attracted to. A handsome Canadian making his own way in the heady World's Fair summer. He was a counterbalance to her father.

And what had she done? She married him, took him back with her to California, and made him her father's slave! She had killed the thing she loved.

Boarding the plane hours later, Mead told himself his wife would never have abandoned him in the early days. She would have come to Baytown with him. They would have shared the experience and nothing would have gone wrong.

He drank a fair amount on the flight. He slipped into the state that passes for sleep on long-distance air travel. His muscles cramped, his nostrils dried up. He was in poor condition when the plane landed. Having claimed his baggage and walked outside, he was hit by ninety-five degrees of Los Angeles heat. The sun was going down but the night was not going to offer much relief.

Mead had plenty of money on him so he passed up the shuttle and took a taxi home. The house was dark. He was as excited as a child playing hide-and-seek, letting himself in to find out where his wife had gone.

The first place he went to was the kitchen. It was as tidy as if nobody lived here. Then he carried his bag into the bedroom and dropped it on the floor. This room, too, was neat. The bed had not been slept in. He checked the wardrobe. There was a clear space, several empty hangers.

In the bathroom, he was able to determine that a number of her makeup articles and lotions were missing, and so was the zippered bag she carried them in. He checked the luggage on the upper shelf in the hall closet. Her overnight bag was gone. Bessie had checked out, probably just after she spoke to him on the telephone. This was the important matter she had to attend to.

Mead collected his car keys from the marble table in the front hall and hurried out to the garage. He had a pretty good idea where he could find her. He got into his car, switched it on, backed out, turned onto the street, and headed for Sunset Boulevard.

The tragic encounter with Sid Harper was turning out to be a blessing in disguise. He was home, suddenly and unexpectedly. He was going to discover, once and for all, what kind of woman his wife really was. He would have reason to free himself from her, and from his bondage to her father.

Mead's senses were finely tuned. Driving the car was a breeze. He negotiated expertly the turns on Sunset as he raced through Westwood, Brentwood, the Palisades, and finally reached the

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Pacific Coast Highway. The drive to Malibu took no time at all. As he approached the road leading into the hills where Max Holland's house was located, Mead told himself to calm down.

"Be cool," he said aloud. "You want to catch them at it. If you blunder in and give them notice, she'll come up with a story. Nothing will be resolved."

Driving under dark trees, seeing the glow of upstairs windows ahead, Mead switched off his headlights and rolled to a stop a hundred yards from the house. He killed the engine, put on the handbrake, got out, and closed the door softly. Then he began walking, picking his steps carefully, taking deep breaths.

Getting inside was going to require some luck. Mead circled the house close up, ducking behind shrubbery, testing windows. At the back, he found one that was raised a few inches. He was able to slide it up far enough to allow his passage through the aperture.

He was in some sort of pantry connected to the kitchen. Hands on walls, moving slowly, he managed to get through the main room and into a corridor that led to the front entrance. Moonlight through windows provided some light. At the foot of the stairway, he was in better shape. There was pale light up on the second floor. Crouching, creeping, fingers balancing two steps ahead, Mead went upstairs.

A door was ajar at the end of the landing. The light was on inside. He could hear Max Holland's voice rumbling softly. Mead made his way there, pressed his back against the wall, craned his neck forward to see inside.

Holland was naked, relaxed on the bed, his elbow on a pillow, hand propping his head. The woman he was talking to was a dark-haired person, lovely, but somebody Mead had never seen before. He was stunned. It was as if he was jolted suddenly from dream to reality. What was he doing? He was sneaking around in Max Holland's house at night, spying on the man in his own bedroom!

And where was Bessie? The truth rang inside Mead's head like a cathedral bell. Max Holland was not her lover! She was too clever to be so obvious. Somewhere in the city, some stranger was in bed with her at this moment. Mead still had to find out who his wife really loved.

He made his way back to the head of the stairs, moving more quickly now. At the bottom, he missed his footing, falling against the front door. He jostled a small table which clattered on the marble floor. The voices stopped upstairs; Mead heard movement on the floor above him as he tried to find his way back to the pantry. It was harder to see in the dark after looking into light.

In the kitchen, he ran into a counter, sending cutlery cascading into the sink. Where was the pantry door? He heard footsteps coming down the stairs. Mead found the door at last and went into

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the tiny room. He was in the window, one knee up, when the pantry door was flung open. He looked back and saw Max in the doorway, standing with his arm raised. There was an explosion and he felt a hard punch in the back.

The gun went off a second time, but Mead felt nothing. He was watching Bessie Turner standing on the parapet near the Biosphere. She was smiling down at him while he took his applause after all those wonderful choruses of "Perdido."

As the jet came in for a landing at the Toronto airport, Bessie wondered if she should call Norman and let him know she was almost there. She decided not to. She had the name of his motel. It would be more fun to surprise him.

He had sounded very upset. She should have gone with him in the first place. Sooner or later she would have to tell him about her affair with Max Holland. Max was talking about marriage. Her best plan was to see Norman through whatever problem was bothering him now. Her bad news could wait.

Marrying Norman had been a mistake. He could be fun, but he was not an adult. The divorce would be unsettling but it would be a relief to move on to Max. Max was a real man. She could rely on Max. ●

"Dammit, I know I told you to wear shades for a disguise—but this is ridiculous!"

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Well Wisher

by Katherine H. Brooks

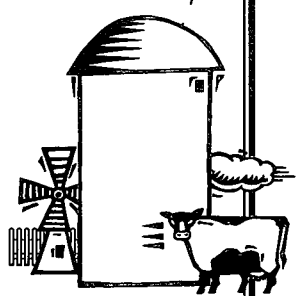
When my farm was planned there was open land
As far as the eye could see,
Till a city jerk with a "nature" quirk
Bought the property next to me.
His name was Jones, and with bankers' loans
He constructed a barn and well,
And the hens he bought were a scruffy lot,
And his pigs had a nasty smell.

With learning nil (of a barnyard skill)
And his penchant for rotten breaks,
My farm next door became more and more
Devalued by his mistakes.
He was kicked by cows and he fell off plows,
And got stuck in the compost pit.
He was stung by bees and attacked by fleas,
And a skunk, in a rabid fit.

He was plagued with fear of a high-strung steer,
And rammed by his goat each day,
And he labored hard at his unkempt yard,
And never had time to play.
His wife of years moved away in tears,
Saying country life was dumb
When he caught his heel in the tractor wheel
And a hatchet removed his thumb.

Then the coons, one morn, gobbled up his corn,
And his mower got stuck in sand,
But Farmer Jones, with his weary bones,
Continued to work the land,
And I got quite tired, as his farm expired,
Of the carnage that spoiled my view—
Of his barren field that refused to yield
And considered a plan or two.

Foul play, they feared, when he disappeared,
And detectives searched for prints,
But I knew he fell in his open well,
And nobody's checked there since.
It's sad to say that he went that way,
But he suffered enough, I think,
And to be quite fair I have posted there
A marker that says, "DON'T DRINK!"



It grieves me not—to review the spot
Where my next-door neighbor lies—
His form afloat like a cast-off boat,
And sheltered from prying eyes—
For the peaceful scene is alive and green,
And rid of that awful smell,
And the way I chose to relieve his woes
Is proof that I meant him "WELL."

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Art by Allen Davis

MANHUNT

by J. W. Whitehead

To this day, I can't imagine why I wasn't the first to discover the swing, the narrow cut in the ravine, the twin mattress wedged into the cut, the newsprint magazines under the mattress. I was the one who ran the ridges that summer, flitting in late-afternoon shadows high above Scott and Carla, my pursuers. I was usually the observant one, aware of tendencies in the other two: where they liked to hide, Carla's preference for staying on the trails, Scott's gravitation to stands of wild rhododendron, twelve and fifteen feet tall. That day, Scott had come up onto the ridge in desperation, hunting me, hoping to get a hawk's view down into the ravine; he'd run maybe twenty yards, then looked down at just the right moment, at the very tree where the swing was looped. A few steps down the steep slope of the 200-foot ravine and he noticed the corner of the mattress. And then he sat down and waited for us to find him, because he knew I would find him before he could find me.

The game itself was simple, really. Cat and mouse, coyote and roadrunner. It grew, I suppose, out of elementary games of child-

©2000 by J. W. Whitehead

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hood: tag, hide-and-go-seek, *ollie-ollie-oxen-free,* yet it was complicated by the dangers of strategy and error and deceit. We were learning, that summer, more complicated ways to mislead each other. One of us would run up into the twenty acres of woods that bordered the northeastern end of the city-owned park next to our development. The park was an estate in the midst of the urban grid, an odd, welcome enclave of woods and ravines and narrow trickles of water, protected by probate in perpetuity. They'd never be able to build there. A wise man had left it as a gift to the city of his fortune, a gift given against an expectation of the city's baser urges to develop and redevelop, to squeeze the acreage of its municipality dry.

"Growing up, one of my dreams was to have my work published in *EQMM,*" John Whitehead once said in a letter to this magazine. For more than a decade now, he's been realizing his dream with darkly reflective pieces that more often than not revolve around the problems of childhood or adolescence. The children in this new story, and the era in which they live, are depicted with uncanny accuracy.

Once the runner had disappeared into the woods with a ten-minute head start, the other two would give chase. They had the remaining fifty minutes of the hour to find the one. I've acknowledged that the game grew out of childish games, but there was another source. We'd seen a movie earlier that summer, a day so hot it drove us out of the heat, away from the swollen community swimming pool and into the mall, to the air-conditioned theaterplex. The second movie we sneaked into after the one we paid for was about a kid our age, high-school freshman, who runs into the woods one night after his dog. This was a weird moment in the movie: For about a minute, nothing happened. You didn't see the kid. You didn't see the dog. I remember there was a light breeze blowing in the woods, making the leaves in the movie murmur and flash in the moonlight. No other sound but the wind in the trees. Scott and Carla were looking at each other like, *Too late to get up and sneak into a different movie?,* but there was something about how long the movie was doing nothing. The more I looked at those woods, the scarier they became. A full minute where nothing happens, where you *need* for something to happen, is a long time. It puts you on edge.

I leaned across Carla, our shoulders pressing, so Scott could hear me, too. I said, "The dog's dead."

The woods sat there on the screen, looking more and more like

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deep water we could fall out of our theater seats into, and then finally, when Carla had clamped a hand on my forearm (and her other on Scott's), the kid came out of the woods. He was carrying the dog.

"How did you know?" Carla said to me, there in the dark.

"I don't know," I said. "I just did."

When the kid goes to school the next day, people wonder what's wrong with him. "My dog died," he tells them as explanation, and at first people believe it's as simple as that. But soon, without the kid understanding why, they have him going to doctors, getting his brain scanned, talking to shrinks. He's different, though no one can quite say how. One night, he and some friends go into the woods with some beers and a joint. They find a place to sit and they drink. They smoke. The soundtrack dies away to the sound of wind in the leaves. I remember sitting in the theater waiting for just that effect, like I'd seen the movie before, like that weird feeling when you've been through this moment already. The kid sees a figure moving in the trees. I remember knowing who it was.

"Who is it?" Carla said. Her arm was through mine, her small breast against my biceps.

"It's the kid," I said.

"No," she said. "The one in the woods, that he sees."

"Him, too," I said. "The kid sees the kid."

She was looking at me, not the screen, during the recognition shot, the kid with a beer in his hand staring, open-mouthed, at his gray, moon-faced twin in the woods. "Look at him," I said.

By the time she turned, the twin was running. The kid got up and ran. His friends, startled, looked at each other in dismay, then followed, running.

"Who was that?" Scott was saying.

Carla said, "Ray thinks it's the kid."

"No," said Scott. "The kid's chasing him. Who's the guy they're chasing?"

Carla said, "Ray thinks that's the kid, too."

The chase was thrilling, because the soundtrack wouldn't tell you what to think. Feet pounded fallen leaves, and the wind blew softly and persistently, and you could hear how out of breath the kids sounded because the beer had taken away their wind. I've forgotten the rest of the movie. It isn't important. We began playing our own game the next day. On summer afternoons with nothing else to do, the woods were cool, the streams cold, the game always new as we learned the woods and each other.

I learned the most. Scott and Carla tended to stay low when they were hunted, to the brush that grew thickest in the ravines just above where the trickles of water ran. Knowing this was how they thought pushed me up onto the ridges in the first place, but

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then I grew to like it up there. From this vantage, I could sometimes watch them, moving at first by design and then, as the time ticked away, without purpose, depending upon luck and constant motion to bring them to me. I was instinctively best at the game because I had learned I could bend it. There were times when I sat in the open—in the crotch of a low-swooping sycamore, or more brazenly, on a rock like a sunning snake—and watched as they passed by me, sometimes only a few yards below where I sat, immobile. It was like they were blinded, or else that I had been changed into some new form, a part of the woods.

The day Scott found the swing, we almost hadn't played the game. It was hot, for one thing. For another, I had a doctor's appointment that afternoon. My mother hadn't let me out of the house until I'd put on my wristwatch. We synchronized mine to hers. Since my father had left us the year before, my mother had adopted small habits of regulation: perfunctory phone calls; notes back and forth on the refrigerator; frequent time checks. It seemed to decelerate her sense of our drifting, inevitably, apart.

I wore the watch until I got outside, then took it off and stuck it in my pocket. Two years before, I'd worn the watch every day, proud to pretend I was a miniature adult, someone with places to go, people to see. Now I hated wearing it, because it felt like I was still pretending.

Scott was already at Carla's when I got there. Our agreement had been to meet at her house at one, but when I got there at quarter-of, the needle of her turntable was deep into *Fragile.* They were reading *Creem,* goofing on the captions. Scott was a short kid, but with thick, powerful arms and legs that looked good in T-shirts and shorts. He wore Adidas basketball shoes—the ones with the three royal blue stripes everyone was wearing that summer—and he had a peculiar way of walking on his toes, almost mincing, but not quite, that had once made me try to start us calling him Rudy, after Rudolf Nureyev.

Carla had a poster of Nureyev over her bed, and when Scott and I would come to her room to play cards or listen to records, we would strike grotesque variations on his pose in the photograph, his legs tight together, feet splayed in a way that would have looked terrible except if Nureyev were doing it—which he was in the poster pose, crotch straining against his tights, arms stretched thin as rubber bands above his head.

"God, he's beautiful," Carla would say, a defense against our mockery.

"I'd kick him out of bed," said Scott one time, paraphrasing our usual declaration of longing about poster-objects in our own rooms.

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"Not much danger you'll ever have to," said Carla.

Scott said, "Why? What do you mean?"

A stupid question, granted, but Scott and I had come to a place in our relationship where, instead of ignoring the stupid things the other might say, we embellished. "What do *you* mean, Rudy?" I said. "You upset you're not going to get your chance with Mr. Sock-Crotch up there?"

Scott was staring me down, a mixture of confused aggression.

"What's 'Rudy' all about?" he said.

"Not *what's,*" I said. *"Who.* Who's Rudy? Here's my idea, submitted for your approval. Watch closely."

I began to walk like Scott, on tiptoes. I'd have forgotten that moment long ago, not even bothering enough with it to dismiss it into insignificance, if not for the fact that no one had laughed. No one said anything—like we were all being *careful* not to say anything. It had made me think.

And coming in before one o'clock that afternoon and seeing them already sitting there like they'd been there all morning, reading *Creem* together, listening to Yes without me, made me think, too. Scott put aside the magazine and said, "So what are we going to do today? Pool?" Yes was doing the "Long-Distance Runaround."

"I can't," I said. I pulled the watch out of my pocket, held it up like a talisman of failure. "I've got to be home by three-thirty."

"O-kay," said Carla, drawing the word out. "So what do we have time for?"

"Manhunt?" I said.

"Who's going?" said Scott.

No one said anything. I had the sense that they were waiting for me to volunteer, that it was something they'd agreed upon earlier.

"I went last time," I said.

"But you're so good at it," she said.

The needle bumped the center of the record. We watched the arm pause a moment, as if trying to remember what it did the last time this happened. Then it lifted, paused, swung out over the vinyl plain, and paused again before coming to rest in its cradle.

"Anyway, I'll go," said Carla. "Ten minutes," she said, as if we were going to cheat, as if there would have been any point to playing the game if we didn't observe the most basic rules.

At the last moment I said, "No, I don't care, I'll go."

We walked out together, then they watched me up the two blocks from her house to the southeast corner of the park.

I don't remember where I headed—for me, there was so little challenge to the game by then. I might have set up as I sometimes did, near the most obvious place for them to enter the woods, a huge fallen tree fortuitously spanning the widest tributary of the creek. From this vantage I would stalk the stalkers, getting as

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close as I could, always undetected. Wherever I might have set up, I remember deciding to follow Carla when they split, and this I did, watching as she moved quickly along the trails, occasionally brushing a strand of brown hair away from her face. After twenty minutes of this, I came up behind her and put my hands over her eyes. She screamed, I laughed, and she hit me, an elbow in the chest as she twisted around to see who I was. I had never been hit before by her or any other girl. She hit me again after she knew it was me, knew she was safe: a half-closed fist to the neck that hurt all the way up into my ear and down into my chest.

"What's your problem?" she said.

"Want to hunt Scott?"

She looked at me, figuring angles. Rules were changing. She wasn't sure what to think about it. "Okay," she said.

We looked in the regular places first, but then it occurred to me that Scott didn't know he was being hunted, so he wouldn't behave as if he were. Carla had no suggestions. I took her off the paths and up the slopes, knowing I was giving away some secrets. We held hands. She was talking about her parents, about their latest blowup. Her father traveled a lot. "Apparently the road must be a lonely place," she said.

"No lonelier than home," I said.

She looked at me again, used the hand that had held mine to push a shank of hair behind her ear, then kept it to herself. I headed further up the slope, and she followed without saying anything.

We were almost on top of Scott before we saw him. He'd already heard us. He was sitting on a blue twin mattress, thin, stained, its back end wedged into a sharp cut in the slope of the ravine. Crushed beer cans and Marlboro wrappers were everywhere in the brush, denser than weeds and old leaves.

There were some tabloid magazines beside Scott on the mattress. "Look at these," he said.

They were swinger magazines, filled with individual Polaroid and Instamatic-quality photographs of plain-looking women, some of them little older than us, and doughy-looking men. Beneath each picture was a poorly written, provocative caption and address. *Box 1469: Daddy's Little Girl seeks new daddy for Sunday "outings" and rewards for being soooo goooood. Shirley T., Rockford, IL. Box 217: Tool man looking for domestic engineering work in charming "fix-her-uppers." Plumbing and hammering a specialty. Jack H., Stone Mountain, GA.* The photographs, though poor in quality, showed everything: men and women holding themselves for the camera as if offering to the viewer pieces of ripe, exotic fruit. We sat together on the mattress, passing them back and forth, aware of the proximity of our bodies. In each

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other's bedrooms, we had sat together on beds without ever giving it a thought, leaning against one another with no more ceremony than we might lean against a wall.

At some point, the angle of the light slanting down through the trees must have changed. Perhaps the stifling afternoon got just-perceptibly cooler. In any case, I stood up to pull out my watch and saw that my doctor's appointment would have started ten minutes ago. My mother had left work an hour early to be home to meet me. "I've got to go," I said.

"Okay," said Carla. She looked up, not at me, but past me, at the sky through the trees, as if becoming aware for the first time of her surroundings.

"Are you guys staying here?" I said.

Scott looked up now, too. He laid the open magazine he was holding on the mattress beside him and stood.

"I thought I'd try that swing," he said.

He went back up the slope to the tree and unwound the swing. It hung nearly to the ground and paralleled the cut—in fact, we could see now that it swung out directly over the mattress, and beyond: out over the steepest drop of the ravine. The fat hemp went straight up, thirty feet or more, until it stopped at a branch as thick as Scott himself, where it appeared to be tied off in a series of well-executed knots.

"Whose stuff *is* this?" I said.

"I don't know," said Scott. "How come you never found this stuff before—or did you already know about it?"

"I didn't know about it," I said. "I wasn't looking for it. I thought this place was just woods."

"I wasn't looking for it either," said Scott. "But I found it."

He'd tentatively climbed out onto the swing itself, a polished stick as thick as my arm, tied off in the middle by the hemp. He had one foot on either side of the knot, and he gently rocked in a tight circle over the cut. To Carla he said, "Push me."

I looked at my watch. "I've got to go," I said.

Carla put her hands in the small of Scott's back. They looked very dark against his white T-shirt. She pushed. He went out over the cut, over the mattress, and swung back. Carla had to scramble out of his way, nervously laughing. The cut leveled off at the point where the swing hung, as if to anticipate the need for backswing. It occurred to me that this spot had been carefully chosen. We were on the northwestern ridge of the park, near a development called Rockledge, a community of high-rise apartments designed for low-income families. Since my father had left us, my mother had begun occasionally broaching the subject of moving to Rockledge, even though all the kids in our neighborhood had grown up with the parental admonition to stay clear of the development and

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its troubled kids. It was our received understanding of childhood that, during the day, the park belonged to us. At night, it reverted to Rockledge.

I said, "This stuff belongs to Rockledge kids."

"Well, I guess so," said Carla. She didn't sound happy about it.

Scott was swinging out beyond the mattress now. I noticed he wasn't looking down. He might as well have been swinging out over the edge of the world. To Carla, he yelled as he swung by, "You want to try this?" and then, after his backswing, "You can ride with me."

She had her arms crossed against her, standing with a hip cocked.

"I've got to go," I said to her.

The branch above us, the rope, the swing all creaked at different frequencies as he swung.

"Then you have to go," she said. "You're going to be in trouble."

Scott called to her again. He didn't call to me because he knew I should already have left. We all knew how my mother worried about me now.

"Are you going to swing?" I said to her.

"No," said Carla. "I don't think so."

Her arms were still crossed under her breasts, as if she were cold. She went back to the mattress and sat down. Her cutoffs rode high on her thighs.

Scott swung, each arc a bit further than the one before.

"See you tomorrow?" I said.

"I don't think so," she said.

"Why not?"

She looked miserable. She had her hand on one of the magazines. "Think about it," she said. "Is your mother going to let you come out after what you did today?"

I ran home, but it couldn't have mattered by then if I did or not. My mother was waiting for me. I knew this even before stepping inside, because the house was dark. Even in the middle of the day, even when she was away at work, and even though she wouldn't be able to afford to keep paying the bills, she set lights in every room on timers. There were always lights on for when she came home, and the only time the lights went off was when she was already at home and feeling abandoned. It was confusing, since I understood the lights to be a way to make the house feel fuller, more lived-in. It was a kind of mourning.

She was sitting in her chair, the one in front of the television. The Watergate hearings were everywhere that summer, but not at our house. My mother couldn't watch them. "Too much negativity," she said. "I don't need it. I've got enough." She was watching

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a rerun of Spring Byington in *December Bride*. The sound was off. There was a television tray set up to the right of her chair, and a sweating tumbler of gin on the tray, half-finished. The house was airless and stifling.

"I called twenty minutes ago to tell them we weren't coming," she said. "You remember what I'm talking about?"

"Yes."

"The doctor's."

"I know."

"They told me I was going to have to pay for the slot anyway. They need at least two hours' notice to make a cancellation. What do you think of that?"

"I'm sorry," I said.

"No," she said. "Not today you're not. Sorry starts tomorrow, when you're grounded for a week."

The lights stayed off in the house the rest of the night. We went to bed early because, after about nine, it was hard to find our way around the house.

The next day, she called every hour, on the hour, to make certain I was home. Same for the day after. She told me I could use the phone, but she wanted to get through on the hour to know I hadn't taken the phone off the hook and slipped out. By the third day, I had begun to wonder what Scott and Carla were doing without me. They'd stopped by for about an hour the first day, and we'd sat and watched Watergate. The room was oppressively hot and loud: the fan on the floor, the traffic outside, the television up so we could hear. I had my sketchbook out, drawing figures like they do in court. We didn't talk much. When they got up to leave, I knew where they were going. It's where I would have gone if I'd been free.

"Where are you going now?" I said.

"I don't know," said Carla. "It's too hot to do anything."

"So stay," I said. "She won't be home for almost two hours."

They didn't sit down. They made vague, unconvincing noises about the pool, the movies, the mall. We were all thinking about the park—the swing, the mattress, the images under the mattress. That secret world.

It was the last I'd seen or heard of them. After my mother called at three on the third day, I knew I had a window of opportunity: The previous two days, she hadn't called at four; she'd simply arrive home at quarter-after. I had an hour.

I called their houses; the phones rang and rang. Then I ran to the park. All day I'd been thinking about an approach. I couldn't come up the ravine at them, as Carla and I had done that first time. I would have to enter the woods from the opposite side, from

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Rockledge. This would mean a fifteen-minute run around the perimeter of the park before I could even begin my approach.

Rockledge, as I neared it, seemed quiet. Still, I stopped running, partly because it was so hot, partly because running made me more obvious in Rockledge than I wanted to be. Two kids my age with shoulder-length hair came out of a high-rise building that overlooked the park. They turned my way, but then passed by without more than glancing at me. I passed mothers with small children, old men in undershirts, old women in painfully sheer housedresses. I tried to imagine my mother and me living here. There were two girls sitting on a bench near another high-rise. They were my age, in tube tops and cutoffs, smoking Marlboros. Completely uninterested in whether anyone saw them. Completely uninterested in seeing me.

I cut into the weeds and tried to get my bearings. I moved as quietly as I could through the brush. I was listening as much as I was looking: I figured I might hear them before I saw them.

The first thing I saw was the swing. It was tied to the tree: a sign of desertion. I almost turned away, but something—a sound, a movement, I don't remember, made me come a dozen steps nearer, to where I could glimpse down into the cut.

They were on the mattress, facing each other, legs folded under them yoga-style as if, until quite recently, they'd been talking together. Their bodies leaned in towards each other, meeting at the hands, the lips. I checked my watch: I had time.

I sat, then, my legs folded like theirs. They were amazing to me, like lovers on a movie screen: They knew what to do. Her arms were around his neck, while his explored her back, stroked her hair. His thumbs occasionally passed lightly over her breasts. They didn't talk; they didn't stop kissing. I wanted to stop them, but I also wanted to watch them. They were beautiful, idyllic—not just Carla, but Scott, too. Even after I knew what action I would have to take, even after I'd looked at my watch and saw that, if I lingered, I'd have to make the entire trip home at a dead run, I lingered, gorging my eyes, willing them to go the next step, to shed clothes as we'd seen in the magazines beneath the mattress. But nothing altered in their naive tableau. The rest, I saw, would unfold with painful slowness over the course of time: their estrangement, my isolation increasingly pronounced, like people in that movie we saw earlier that summer recognizing that the kid with the dead dog had been changed by his time in the woods.

Running back through Rockledge, I passed the two kids with shoulder-length hair again. "Hey, kid," one of them said to me. I kept running—not even a hesitation to let on I'd heard. "You *better* run, loser," the kid called after me, as if even he knew what

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was waiting for me at home if I didn't. If it had been ten degrees cooler that day, I'm convinced they would have given chase.

I beat my mother home with five minutes to spare, time enough to turn on the hearings and put a glass of 7-Up out to sweat on the TV-tray, strip out of my sopping clothes and bury them in the hamper, jump into a cool shower, and act surprised when she called to me from downstairs, "Honey, I'm sorry you were stuck here in this kind of heat all day. When you get dried off and dressed, come down and we'll talk about dinner."

She was in a more expansive mood than I'd seen in a long time. She wanted to go out to eat at the Villa, a cool, dim Italian restaurant near the mall, with fake vines hanging from the ceiling beams and fake crumbling plaster on the walls. It's where we'd pretended to celebrate the day her divorce from my father had become final.

"I have a date," she told me over dessert. "This weekend, with a nice man I met."

She sat watching me across the candlelit table, as if I might have something useful to say.

"That's great," was all I could muster.

"He's in realty," she said. "I'm talking to him about selling the house."

I ate a piece of my cheesecake. "Okay," I said.

"It's not okay," she said. "I know it's not. I'm sorry it's not."

"Mom," I said, "it's okay."

I'd be looking for new friends soon anyway. I could grow my hair long, begin smoking. I could write letters to grainy, black-and-white naked girls with box numbers at swinger magazines. In Rockledge, no one knew me. If I walked in the right way, I could be someone else, not a loser who sat around watching Watergate and pulling out my mom's Carly Simon albums every night, not to listen to them but to stare at the cover art.

My mother put down her fork and rested her chin on her folded hands, elbows propped on the table edge. "You're lonely," she said. "A week's a long time to ground a kid, especially in the summer. I was too hard on you."

"No," I said. "You weren't too hard."

Her date was on Friday night. She gave me money to go to the mall and see a movie. "See if Scotty can go," she suggested. Oddly, she'd never acknowledged that we were a threesome, not a pair; ironically, she'd gotten it right without knowing it.

The man who came to the door to pick her up surprised me: He was her age, not much older than her like the other men I'd seen occasionally take her out. He smelled of cigarettes and aftershave and freshly laundered clothes. I was watching the evening news,

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eating a Swanson's Hungry Man turkey dinner at the TV tray. I wandered back to my chair, and he followed me.

"My mom says she'll be right down," I told him. She'd been ready for half an hour, but she would make him wait at least half as long.

"May I sit down?" he said.

"Sure," I said. "Do you want a 7-Up or some Gilbey's or something?"

"No, thanks," he said. He laughed. "I'm driving!"

I smiled what I hoped was a generous smile, because I didn't want to make him unhappy for her.

"Turkey," I said, nodding at my tray. "If you've got a freezer and an oven and one of these, every day can be Thanksgiving."

He didn't know what to do with this comment, but it didn't stop him.

"I think that's true," he said. "I mean, about Thanksgiving. Personally, I feel very lucky." He pushed a hand through his thick, black hair. "I've only recently come to this recognition, but I feel it strongly. I'm very thankful for what I've been given."

I swallowed some greasy stuffing. "What have you been given?" I said.

He didn't answer. He'd glazed a bit, his eyes vaguely watching the television, where Senator Sam Ervin was drawling a question with that wry look on his face.

"Pardon?" he said. His face swung slowly from the television back to me. He suddenly looked tired.

"So where are you going?" I said. "I mean, tonight, with my mom?"

"A little business, a little pleasure," he said. "Your mom says she likes to dance. What would you say—is she any good, or are my feet going to hurt tonight?"

I pictured my mother dancing with my father at family events; they'd both been bored by it, by each other.

"Oh yeah," I said. "She's great."

From the top of the stairs, my mother floated down a greeting: "Hello, Evan. Don't settle in. I'll be right down."

He stood to call back, "No hurry. We're just chewing the fat down here."

I held up a forkful of turkey. "Actually," I said, "that would be me chewing most of the fat."

He stood beside the chair, hands in his pockets, absently jingling loose change. "You know," he said, "you're a funny kid. Did you know that? Your mother says you're a good kid, but she didn't mention you're a funny kid."

"What's the business?" I said.

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He sat back down again. "Pardon?" he said, straightening a straight trouser cuff.

"You said a little business, a little pleasure. You're going dancing, which would probably be the pleasure part unless you're, like, Arthur Murray or somebody. What's the business?"

Now he laughed, and he loosened his tie. He adjusted his trouser cuff again. "Your mom apparently forgot to tell me a lot about you."

"You're a realtor, she told me. Are you going to look at places tonight?"

My mother called, "Well, I've done what I can," descending the stairs and sweeping into the room. She had on a one-piece pants suit, sleeveless. The color was somewhere between rust and orange. She'd teased her hair into a shiny brown ball, and she'd tied a brown and gold scarf around her neck. Her heels were four inches high, and the shoes were the same brown as the scarf. She smelled like a department store, which must have been flattering to him. She looked pretty, but it was such a fragile, desperate prettiness that I had to look away. As it was, I was afraid I might cry. I didn't know what was happening.

I heard them exchange a quick, chaste peck of greeting, and then she knelt down beside my chair. "Honey," she said, "we're going now. You go out for a little while tonight, too, and have a nice time. See that new Pink Panther movie. Let's all go out for a while tonight and be happy."

"Okay," I said.

"I should be flattered," said Evan. "I think he's a bit jealous." He came over, put his left hand on my mother's bare shoulder, and stuck the right hand out near my face. "Listen," he said. "I know who's number one around here, kid. Your mom already made that clear. I recognize where any guy like me's going to finish in a race for your mother's affections. Tell you what, kid: Just leave a little bit left to go around, okay?"

I knew he meant well, and so I trusted him to make my mother happy tonight. Neither of them understood why I felt ready to cry—I hardly understood it myself. I felt alone. Maybe it was a legacy of my mother, but I wanted to be alone in the dark, where my loneliness could be pure ache, not this ambiguous opportunity for us all to go out and be happy for a while. Because I knew what she would need from me to be happy, I pretended I was listening to the end of what Harry Reasoner was saying. Evan had found my sketchbook, and he and my mother were flipping through pages, exclaiming over likenesses. He recognized all the conspirators I'd drawn. My mother said, predictably, "I can't watch this stuff. It makes me feel like there's no level where people can be expected to behave the way they should."

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Evan said, "Hey, sweetheart, this is the last level where you *should* expect it."

When the news broke to commercial, I turned to them, hoping for deadpan, and said, "I want you kids home before twelve," and this dissolved their anxiety about me into a renewed anticipation for themselves: *Maybe we'll have such a good time we'll* want *to be out past midnight.* And so when they'd left, I went upstairs for a while and listened to music, and after the sun had set, I put on long, dark pants to avoid the poison ivy and being seen, slipped my watch and a penlight and dish gloves and my pocketknife into my pants pockets, and entered the dark.

The hours whiled away in the woods playing manhunt came in handy: I could still find my way by the sound of water, the bends in the creeks, the grade of the ravines, the fallen logs and stone outcroppings. Yet the woods were different at night, and not only because I knew they belonged to Rockledge for the next ten hours or so. The habitation changed. I heard bats overhead, feeding, and an owl called from nearby and then fled in a scattering of wings.

I expected some trouble in finding the swing and the mattress, but even these lacked mystery now. I came upon them exactly where I expected them. There was no one around. I went straight to the mattress and checked underneath. The magazines were there, but I couldn't spend more than a moment flipping through, my penlight held in my teeth like a secret agent. Then I stashed them back in safekeeping and sat a moment on the mattress, in the very center, the nexus where Scott's lips had met Carla's and their hands had followed. Part of me wanted to wait right here, the new Rockledge kid, to see who showed—maybe those two disinterested girls I'd seen the day before, in their tight, ribbed tube tops and shorts, their polished nails tapping the latest David Bowie or Kiss song on their Marlboro packs. I'd lay here with both of them and smoke and, at the opportune time, roll their tube tops off of them like unwrapping tidy packages of some sweet snack, a Twinkie, a Devil Dog, a Creamsicle. I thought of my mother nearby with Evan, in some half-empty Rockledge apartment; she's appraising the view, the floor plan, while he's got a kindly arm around her, pointing out this feature, suggesting that improvement. His hand resting on the narrow ledge of her hip.

I put on the dish gloves. I unwound the swing from the tree and stood on the stick. It was firm. I was tempted to swing, but my time was short. I climbed. With the gloves it was easier than I thought. Whenever I began to slip, I spit on them. The air seemed to cool as I climbed higher, and at a certain point about five feet from the branch, I knew I'd better not look down again. Naturally I did. I could barely see the swing in the gloaming below.

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Out on the branch, I straddled and stayed for a moment, frozen. Cold. I took out the penlight and put it in my mouth again. I opened my pocketknife. Shining the light on the graying strands of hemp, I began cutting—a few fibers here, a tendon there. The knots were massive, each one as big as my fist, and I sawed through every one until none held by a thickness greater than my little finger.

Then I climbed down by branches. The lowest was about ten feet off the ground, and I hung from this and dropped. My foot hit a root, but my ankle rolled with it and felt okay. Still no sound of anyone coming, and then I heard why: thunder rumbling in the distance. I wound the swing back into place against the tree and half-ran, half-slid my way down the ravine.

At home I set up in the living room to wait for my mother, though it was only ten-thirty. I knew if she came home much before twelve, she would need to talk, and she would probably cry. There was a war movie on UHF, and though the storm played havoc with the reception, I could follow it because I'd seen it before: A special force gets the job of trying to break into this Nazi stronghold up high on this mountain. Clint Eastwood's there, and Robert Shaw, and a bunch of other guys. These days, you can see it on cable every couple of nights.

The movie ended at twelve. I left all the lights on and cleared out of the living room, up to my room. I was thinking a fog of thoughts—where my mother was and what she and Evan might have decided for us; the swing, hard rain sifting through to slick the tree trunk and swing and the frayed hemp; Scott and Carla. I thought about the Rockledge girls in the tube tops, but I couldn't sustain it: When I saw us together on the mattress, it was like snakes roiling, queasily erotic, something to watch with your eyes closed, if you know what I mean. Scott and Carla were different, like lovers on some medieval tapestry. They were better than me. Better than I will ever be.

I must have fallen asleep. When I awoke, it was to darkness: My mother had been in to turn off the lights. Rain tapped steadily at the window. Three-thirty by my bedside clock. The whole house was dark. I walked down the hall and used the bathroom. I could smell Evan in the house—that well-groomed, aftershave smell. I wondered how often he took his clients out to dinner and dancing, whether he had any interest in her beyond the commission. I went back to bed before I could find out whether he was taking part of his commission that night, under our roof, and I dropped straight off to sleep, as if the answer were, for me, a foregone conclusion, or worse: an irrelevance.

The next day, the rain was settled in, and my ankle was swollen. I limped except when my mother might see me. If Evan

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had stayed the night, he was gone before I emerged at nine-thirty. My mother was cooking eggs and sausage, the sausage chopped up and sizzling right in amongst the clouds of beaten eggs.

"Did you go out last night?" she said.

"For a little while. There was a good movie on UHF with Clint Eastwood, so I made it home to watch that."

"You stay home too much. There're good movies to go to at the mall, aren't there?"

I wanted to ask her what difference it made if I sat by myself at home and watched a movie or sat by myself in the dark in a large public room. Staying home, it seemed to me, was actually less pathetic. But I didn't say these things. It would have made her ask questions about "Scotty" and why I didn't have more friends. She'd ask why I always seemed so unhappy, and she'd speculate about whether it could all be laid at the doorstep of her divorce from my father. That was one of her expressions: "laid at the doorstep," as if guilt and blame were something random that could be delivered unexpectedly by some moral package service. Most of all, I didn't say anything because she seemed happy that morning, and failing my own happiness, hers was the next best thing. So I asked a question to build on *her* happiness: "Did you have fun last night?"

She turned to look at me, a quizzical glance that hurt me with its caution. I saw that, in this area at least, she couldn't trust me. It hurt no less to know she was right.

"I did," she said. "Evan is a nice man. He listens."

"Are you going to see him again?"

She spooned our eggs onto two plates and slapped mine down in front of me like a waitress in a diner. "I suppose that's up to Evan," she said. She sat down across from me. "What did you say to him last night, while I was getting ready?"

Pretending to get ready, I thought. I wondered if being dishonest was a sign of maturity.

"What do you mean?" I said.

"He said—and he was a good sport about it, I have to admit—that you were grilling him. Like you were accusing him of something."

The rain streamed down the dining-room window, and I watched it, seeing the trickles come together and move apart, brushing up against each other, coupling and parting in complete disinterest.

"I wasn't aware of that," I said.

The rain kept up all weekend. Scott and Carla didn't call, maybe because they thought I was still grounded, maybe because they'd discovered how much they preferred to be alone. Evan called my

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mother early in the afternoon on Sunday, and she went into her bedroom and talked for an hour. Maybe she talked longer: After an hour, I got an umbrella and went out. I had no idea, setting out, where I was headed, but there was really only one place to go, and so I went.

The air was thick, misty and warm like a bathroom after a warm shower. In the woods, the noise was like a waterfall, the creeks swollen to rushing rivulets, the leaves in the trees and on the ground percussive with rain. Yet the canopy of hearty summer leaves caught enough of the rain to allow me to lower my umbrella. Which must have been when I had the inkling that Scott and Carla were there, so that I became quiet as I approached the secret place, climbing a neighboring ridge, using the din of falling water as deeper cover.

What I saw has frustrated all my subsequent attempts to capture it. My paintings—the abstract ones, filled with dark shapes and menace—sell; when I paint the virgin couple in the woods, however, the canvas sits there, lifeless. The images are sentimental, even trivial. My broker has long since come to terms with it. "Another one," she will say. "The others are lies," I say; "I'm not good enough to paint this one." "You're damned good," she will tell me. She will lay this at my doorstep. I will leave with her my latest paintings, pocket my latest commission check, and return to the studio to try again. My memory is a museum, its central chamber that rainy Sunday afternoon, with my mother on the phone at home negotiating our future and my lost friends Scott and Carla stripped to their brown, streaming skins and kneeling together on the mattress in the cut, their bodies pressed together into a new, more beautiful form.

They hadn't bothered with the swing; I don't think they'd even disturbed the magazines, safe and dry under the mattress. Their clothes were neatly folded on a corner of the mattress, like a pillow.

I wanted to leave them alone, but I couldn't.

I went back to the bottom, and this time I came straight up, making as much noise as I could, staying persistently visible. By the time I could see them, Carla was sitting primly in her peasant blouse and overall cutoffs on the corner of the mattress where their clothes had been, and Scott was idly swinging in a tiny circle, twisting the rope back and forth so that he gently twirled.

"Hey," I said.

Scott said, "Did you sneak out, or your mom took pity on you?"

"Pity," I said. "She told me to go out and play in the rain."

Carla stood up and came over, trying to be bright, to be happy to see me. "Where's your umbrella?" she said.

I stared at her a second. It was a good question she was asking.

"I don't have it," I said.

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"Now *there's* a news flash," said Scott.

I nodded at the swing. "So you like this?"

"It's all right," said Scott.

I said, "Want a push?"

Carla said, "He's insane. He goes all the way out over the edge. If he fell, it would be like jumping off a building." She sounded excited, breathless. It reminded me not to sound that way.

I took hold of the rope, pushed it into his back, and ran him out as far as I could to the edge of the cut, nearly to the mattress. I slid forward and dived onto the mattress and felt my ankle beginning to throb. Scott swung back past me, within a foot of my head, whooping. Carla pushed him this time, and I watched him swing back out, the stick he stood on, the hemp he held, the branch above us all singing their separate lines of tension. Over and over again he flew out and returned, and my breath became regulated by the long arcs of his swing: near death, near ground; near death, near ground. Carla and I alternated turns pushing him and sometimes ran him out to the edge together, an ecstatic force of flight, and each wheeze and pop from above suggested this would be the last, and we would all be alone together again.

I don't remember when Carla said she wanted to try; some things just seem to have to happen. In that movie we saw earlier that summer, for instance, I can't remember why the boy had taken his dog into the woods in the first place, but I wasn't surprised either that he did or that it wouldn't be a good thing for the dog. Scott slowed to a stop. Carla moved up expectantly to take his place.

I wanted to say, "Let me try." I wanted to force my way past her and step on before Scott was off. The singing tension in the rope and branch was terrific. "I'm sorry," I wanted to say to Carla. "Please let me do this."

But I let her swing.

That the rope held does not absolve me. Like a warning, the rain increased; we could hear it at first, then we could feel it as it trickled down through the tree-canopy and fell on us. Carla stopped, the prudent one, and stepped off. We wound the swing back in place on the trunk. The woods were drowning in noise and spattering rain, as loud as a factory, machining mud and mulch. The air was suddenly filled with water, almost too much to breathe, and without thinking, each of us instinctively ran for our umbrellas—theirs together beside the mattress, mine beyond the lip of the secret place, up the ridge in the direction of Rockledge, where I'd distractedly left it in the brush. Then we headed back down.

My mother and I moved to Rockledge later that summer, and Evan stayed overnight with her a couple of times in the room next

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to mine before fading away. Scott and Carla faded, too, and so, for that matter, did I: I became a Rockledge kid, rolling tube tops off girls while they rolled condoms onto me. The secret place became a regular night-haunt. Once in a while, if I was feeling especially alone, I might wander there during the day, wondering if I might stumble on Scott and Carla, on that tableau of beauty, but I never saw them there again. Had they acknowledged in that moment in the driving rain that my umbrella, once lost, had so easily and in so strange a place been found? Probably not; they weren't practiced in the forms of deceit. But looking back, as I have, the umbrella must surely have snagged on their memory and made them pause. As for the swing, sometime before that weekend was over, it broke. I know because I went back Monday morning, and it was a sodden, coiled heap next to the tree. I learned later that it happened while a bunch of Rockledge kids were gathered there, drinking. No one was hurt. No one even bothered to hang the swing again. It was no big deal.

Solution to the Mystery Crossword

F	A	L	C	O	■	A	L	E	C	■	I	C	E	S
A	P	E	A	R	■	N	E	R	O	■	D	A	L	E
S	T	O	N	E	A	N	G	E	L	■	E	S	T	E
■	■	■	■	S	R	A	S	■	O	R	A	T	O	R
P	E	S	E	T	A	S	■	G	R	A	T	I	N	■
U	N	T	I	E	S	■	C	R	A	V	E	N	■	■
M	O	O	N	S	■	P	R	I	D	E	■	S	R	O
A	C	N	E	■	A	L	A	M	O	■	S	T	U	D
S	H	E	■	A	L	I	V	E	■	D	I	O	D	E
■	■	K	I	B	B	E	E	■	L	I	N	N	E	T
■	R	I	D	E	R	S	■	H	A	C	K	E	R	S
S	O	L	I	D	I	■	R	I	C	K	■	■	■	■
O	S	L	O	■	G	R	A	V	E	S	T	O	N	E
P	I	E	T	■	H	O	S	E	■	O	I	L	E	R
H	E	R	S	■	T	I	P	S	■	N	E	E	D	S

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BY PETER LOVESEY

Under Suspicion
BY CLARK HOWARD

A Slow Way To Di
BY ROBERT BARNARD

Vanished As She Sang
BY CLAYTON EMERY

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Breakthrough dieting technique uses metabolic enhancers so you can lose unwanted pounds—*in just six days!*

by Anne Regalia

European wisdom about cleansing the body by periodically abstaining from solid foods led to the development of the Six-Day BioDiet, a program of fruit and vegetable juice meals and metabolic enhancers that cleanse impurities from your body and take off unwanted pounds in just six days!

This wisdom led to the development of the Six-Day BioDiet, a program of fruit and vegetable juice meals and metabolic enhancers that cleanse impurities from your body and take off up to 14 pounds in six days!

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Six days to a new you. Commit yourself to the program and you'll soon feel the effects of detoxification and weight loss! Get lots of rest, mild exercise and drink plenty of water in addition to the juice cocktails. By the third day you may already start to see results!

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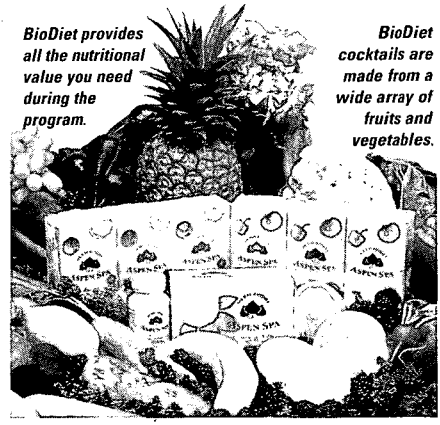

BioDiet provides all the nutritional value you need during the program.

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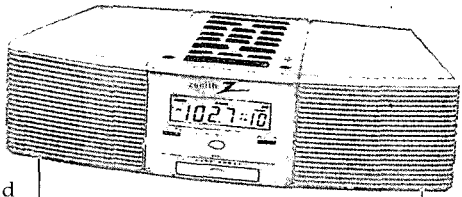

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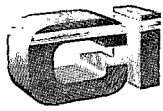

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